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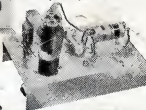
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SUMMER
1948

PLANET

stories

20c

For 1,000,000 years she slept, Nuala of the Nekalad,
roused at last to join the Outworlder against

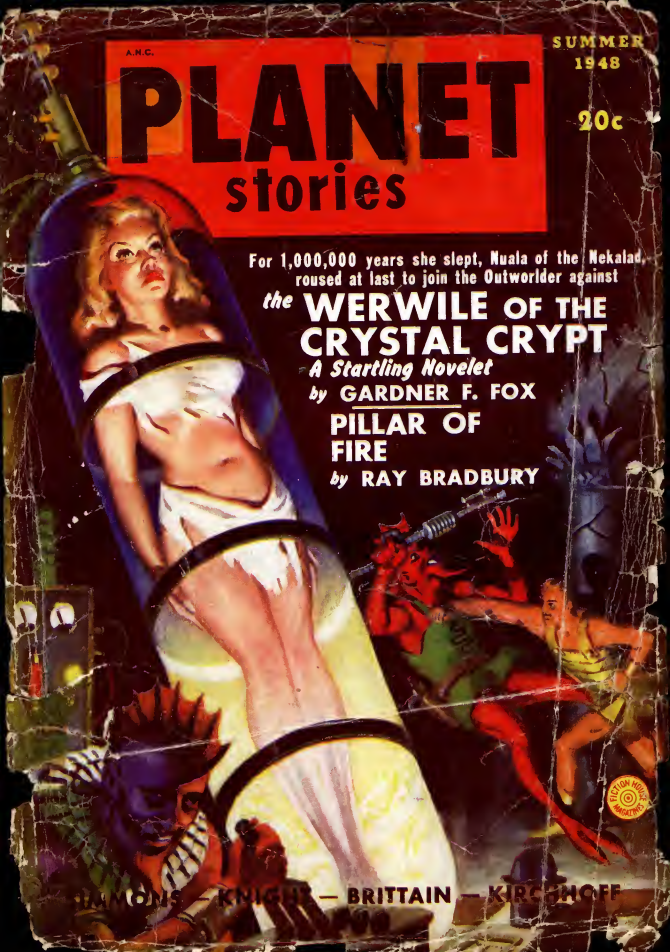
the **WERWILE OF THE CRYSTAL CRYPT**

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PLANET STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, Pres.

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Summer Issue 1948



Vol. III, No. 11

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THE VIZIGRAPH

This corner of good old PS is reserved for malingerers and poetasters, gripes and greetings. If it's on your chest, get it off here. Jack Clements to the contrary notwithstanding, this is not a straight STFan department; we stay clear of fan-fests and fanzines.

No, this is just letters-to-the-editor. If everybody else votes your letter tops, we send you an original illustration from the issue preceding that in which your letter appears. You're welcome to lash out at anything—or stroke it caressingly. We only ask that you typewrite on one side for only two pages.

This time the boys and girls voted Lin Carter's letter in the last ish best. Lin knows by now he has one choice—the first. Next comes Chad Oliver (Chad! *Second* place?) and he has two picks, in case Lin named one he wanted. Third is Martin Axelrod, with three choices. Each gets only one illustration.

We received a complaint (of course, inevitably, forever). A letter-writer indignantly informed us that *he'd* added up the choices in the last Vizi—and didn't get the score we gave. Friend, the answer is easy. We don't print all the letters—*can't* print all the letters. So you don't see all the letters. See?

To settle another beef, those writing from Luna, Mars and Venus are just out of luck. We're sorry, but even the Luna Rockets can't bring PS to you soon enough for you to meet our deadlines. By the time we get your comments, the ish you worked over is dead and the next, or the next after that, is on the fire. Perhaps, someday the technicians will work out facsimile-reception on an IP basis.

Until then . . .

PLANET'S LOLLYGAGGING PANEGRYST

FROM AN OLD FAN

68 Madbury,
Durham, N. H.

DEAR EDITOR,

Your cover this ish was very striking, one of the most life-like since the day of Rozen. Nasty old BEMs (not really bug-eyed this time—merely burning with some inner fire) are chasing the heroine. The constant repetition of this theme grows wearisome. I imagine this statement will have a most profound effect on your future cover policy?

In La Vizi, Bradley comments on space travel—always an interesting subject. Actually, Bob, space travel inside the solar system is not dependent on the motions of either the solar system or the galaxy. The motion of the rocket ship and the planets will be equal in this respect. His next few sentences are sure mixed up and as far as I can discover, are meaningless. The force that holds us to the earth is a combination of gravity and centrifugal force resulting from rotation. He says that the pull of gravity is 25,200 miles per hour. Pull (the physical term is force) has no connection with a velocity at all. Force is proportional to mass times acceleration. In other words, we tend to fall towards the center of the earth at some 32 feet per second-squared. The force (strain on

(Continued on page 121)

THERE is a definite I.C.S. type. The records of 130,000 current students . . . more than 5 million students since 1891 . . . supply the outlines. Here's how the typical enrollee shapes up at the time of beginning his studies:

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Pell smiled, leveled the blaster and depressed the stud.



Erupting from hyper-space in the teeth of startled DIC patrols and readying all hands for a crash-landing, adventurer Fletcher Pell could still wonder which he dreaded more—the U-235 in the hold . . . or the strange girl by his side.

Z-DAY ON CENTAURI

By HENRY T. SIMMONS

PELL TWISTED INTO THE black maw of the alley and ran silently and swiftly into its depths. His breath came in whistling agonized gasps. Faintly he heard the foot-steps of his assailant—now more clearly as the latter turned into the alley after him. Vaguely Pell could make out his sil-

houette outlined by the dim light that filtered in from the street.

"Ugh!" Pell struck a hard surface at the end of the alley with a grunt that he could not stifle.

Trapped! Frantically he felt about to find an opening. Softly and steadily he cursed himself, trying to keep black des-

pair at bay. Maybe if he . . . but the idea died in birth.

"Chuu!"

A blue lancet of flame arced over Pell's shoulder and struck the wall, turning a small area into running slag. The heat and pricking of the radiation Pell ignored. But the brief flash had given up his position. Then he heard his pursuer laugh softly and he knew the game was up. He felt rather than heard him moving in.

Paumm!

Pell's universe rocked in the reverberating thunder of the explosion.

Paumm! Paumm!

Twice more it was repeated and in the vivid flash Pell saw his assailant twist and collapse on his face. His amazement fought with a new dread. Someone had come to his aid, but with an ancient, chemical-reaction, hand weapon. What did that mean? With his back tensed against the wall, Pell strained his perceptions to the utmost, trying to adjust his eyes once more to the darkness. Then he jumped.

"Pell!" It was a woman's voice! "Fletcher Pell! Come out—I am a friend!"

He was aware of a faint outlander quality in her accent—as if she were a colonial. Dimly he could make out her slight figure at the mouth of the *cul de sac*. He moved cautiously toward her, stopping to pick up the blaster of the fallen DIC agent. The comforting feel of its butt gave him confidence as he walked toward her.

"Who are you?" Pell asked. She was small and lithe, and in the dim radiance of the street lights he noticed that she had brown hair with glints of spun-gold in it.

She did not reply to his question but put a soft hand over his mouth. "Let your questions wait. We must leave quickly, else they find us," she said huskily. She led him from the alley and walked breathlessly down the dark street, two of her steps matching one of his long ones.

There was a fast-looking black speeder at the corner. She motioned him in and no sooner had the door closed than the speeder leaped forward and melted into the traffic. The girl relaxed in the seat

beside him, the sudden easing of the tension making her hands shake.

"Who are you?" Pell asked, repeating his earlier question.

She looked at him keenly in the dim light that splashed through the windows of the speeder. "Perhaps, Mr. Pell," she replied at length, "it would not be too wise to reveal identities yet. I have a certain proposition to discuss and I think it might be better to talk first about that."

Pell shrugged and said, "As long as you choose to remain my unknown benefactor, how about benefiting me with a drink?"

The voice of the driver replied unexpectedly from the front seat. "Here."

Pell accepted a gleaming flask and took a long drink. "Ahh," he said at length. "Do you have much ulcer trouble on Centaura?"

The girl looked at him, startled. "You are very shrewd, Pell. I hope you won't become too clever for your own good."

Out of the corner of his eye Pell saw her hand creep for the pocket of her jumper and it occurred to him that silence would possibly be wiser at that.

THE voice of the driver broke in from the front seat. "Miss Helmuth, the DIC patrols are thick around here—we had better head out of town."

The girl looked through the plastine rear window and the dim glow of the street lamps etched lines of strain about her mouth. "You're right, Heintz. Slip out of the traffic and head for the space port."

Heintz grunted affirmatively and presently the black speeder emerged from the traffic and roared out of the city, leaving behind the red and black DIC patrols aimlessly searching the city for Pell and the unknown killer of the DIC agent.

The girl turned to him once more and began to speak—rather cautiously, it seemed to Pell.

"We have been looking for you for a long time, Pell," she said. "It was only by the purest accident that we found you in time to save your life tonight."

"Formerly you were a space pilot—in fact you owned a business. But you were crushed by the Drake Interstellar Corporation, even to the extent of losing your

license. And now the DIC, taking no chances with you, is determined to kill you. Because you are a hunted enemy of the DIC and a space pilot, we felt that you might be interested in our proposition."

"And what is that?" Pell asked.

"If you are to remain alive," she replied, "you must leave Earth. But you have no ship. I have the ship and also want to leave Earth, but cannot without a pilot."

"Then why don't you simply hire a licensed pilot and be done with it?" Pell asked, his eyes narrowed.

"No licensed pilot would accept the job."

"Then how do you know I will?"

"Have you followed in the daily papers the account of the Junta on Centauri V?" she countered.

Instantly Pell realized the fantastic truth. Indeed he had heard of the coup. Insurgents had successfully taken over the government and were keeping the DIC warships at bay with planet-mounted blast rifles. But speculation was rife in the daily papers as to how long they could hold out with their limited supply of U-235, for it was the colonial policy of the DIC-controlled Earth Government never to allow more than a meager amount of the universal fuel to be shipped at any one time to a colonial planet.

With growing amazement, Pell realized that the girl was an agent of old Matt Faradson, the leader of the revolt. And her purpose here on Earth was now obvious to him. He felt a quick rise in sympathy for her, but kept it out of his voice.

"In other words, you want me to pilot you and a load of U-235 to Centauri V?" he asked bluntly.

The girl nodded. "We have managed to secure secretly five kilos of U-235 and it is now stored in the ship's cadmium and graphite vaults. With it, Faradson will be able to stand off the constant skirmishing attacks of the DIC until he can build his own refining plants."

Pell whistled softly to himself, his mind busy on the train of thought the girl had presented. Of course, the Earth Government was little more than a semblance of democracy now; its shortsighted actions of more than two hundred

years ago had brought it to its present situation where it was little more than a mouth-piece of huge economic empires like the Drake Interstellar Corporation, one of the largest.

When the planets of the solar system had been opened up for exploitation, the Earth Government rashly granted proprietary charters to the corporations to handle them. And even then, two hundred years ago, colonial trouble existed. As a matter of fact, they prompted Earth's decision not to allow the refining of U-235 anywhere except Earth, although it could be mined on any planet and shipped to Earth for refining. It was this control of the universal power source that enabled the Earth Government to hold the colonial planets of her interstellar empire in such tight rein. And the DIC practically controlled the Earth Government, so there it was.

Faradson's Insurgents had revolted against that control. In addition they wanted an equal and democratic voice in the Earth-Mars-Venus Federation, as well as freedom to manufacture their own U-235.

PELL looked up at the girl thoughtfully. He noticed that she had been watching him anxiously, apparently awaiting his reply to her proposition.

"Okay," he said at last. "I'm game. Now how about answering a few questions for me, Miss . . . ah . . ."

"Helmuth, Margaret Helmuth—but I prefer Gret. What are your questions?"

"That was one of them," Pell replied, grinning. "Why don't you get one of your own men to pilot the ship?"

"Colonials are not allowed the mastery of space navigation or piloting. It's a security measure," she replied simply. "They are allowed to master space mechanics, however. Heintz is your mechanic, incidentally." She indicated the man in the front seat behind the wheel of the speeder.

"How about weapons? Why do you use such a cumbersome, ancient thing like that pistol?"

Gret Helmuth laughed. "I see you know very little about colonial affairs, Pell. Of course we are not allowed the use of atomic weapons—that would make

revolt all too easy. And naturally I could not risk acquiring one here.

"You see, almost all of our technology is geared on a twentieth century level. Only the DIC-controlled power stations and their mercenary army on Centaura are allowed the use of atomic power and weapons."

Pell shrugged and looked at the dark countryside rushing past the speeder. He had not known that it was really as bad as all that. Obviously the colonials had good reason for their revolution. And now it was up to him to run a DIC blockade and deliver five kilos of U-235 to the revolutionaries. Absently he put a cigarette in his mouth and flicked the stud of his lighter.

Gret Helmuth's startled whistling gasp snapped him out of his reverie. Even Heintz grunted audibly from behind the wheel and the speeder swerved slightly as it sped down the road.

Pell stared from one to the other with surprise. "What's the matter with you two?" he asked.

"That—that thing you're lighting that cigarette with! What is it?" Gret gasped.

"Oh!" Pell laughed. "I see you're not very familiar with Earth technology," he mocked. "This is a 'Rippo Little-Blast Dandy Atomic Cigarette Lighter.' Cute little novelty, isn't it?"

He flicked the stud again, demonstrating its pale blue flame. In spite of herself, Gret shuddered. Heintz sputtered something in the front seat which Pell didn't quite catch.

II

SILENTLY THE SPEEDER drove down the ramp past rows of cradled space ships. In the darkness Pell could see very little more than their shadowy shapes. Over on the east part of the field Pell could make out the nightly DIC liner to Mars loading passengers. He wondered vaguely what kind of a ship they were using. From what Gret had said about not desiring to attract attention, he was already a little dubious.

Smoothly the black speeder drew to a halt and Pell got out to examine the little ship before him. It was an obsolete Mark

III interceptor. Pell whistled softly as he looked at the hull where huge flakes of rust were apparent, even in the dim light. Its jets were in bad condition; their surfaces were corroded and scarred, but he noted with satisfaction that they had recently been scraped clean of exhaust deposits. Followed by the girl and Heintz, he entered the air-lock and looked at the interior of the ship.

"Let me show you the fine points of this can, Pell," the fat man said, switching on the illumination. He squeezed by Pell and shoved his ungainly body up the passage-way to the control room.

When Pell entered, the fat man's face was creased with a smile that extended from one huge ear to the other on his tiny bullet head. Proudly he pointed at the celestial globe for extra-dimensional navigation.

"Ain't that a beauty? And here's the Thelmar Distorter Generator. Installed it myself, just this afternoon."

With a sinking feeling, Pell stared at the incomprehensible maze of cables that spewed out of the thing and slithered across the deck to their unknown destinations. Heintz squeezed by him again and thrust himself back through the narrow passage-way to the waist where Gret Helmuth was waiting.

Heintz demonstrated the jerry-built uranium vaults which had been welded hap-hazardly to any convenient spot. "It's all there," Heintz beamed. "Enough to last ten years."

He motioned for Pell to follow him and disappeared into the stern of the ship.

Pell emerged a few minutes later, his face an unnatural shade of green. With great deliberation he lowered himself into one of the shock chairs and looked up at Gret Helmuth helplessly.

"That creaky converter won't even get us off the ground, much less take the hyper-space jump," he said.

She looked at him coolly and replied, "This is the best we could do, Mr. Pell. If you are afraid, you can back out now, but—" she produced the ancient automatic pistol she had used with such deadly effect earlier in the evening, "I warn you that I will have to kill you if you do. We cannot take chances."

Pell looked at her eyes. They were bleak and frosty and as hard as blue diamonds. He knew she meant what she said. He shrugged. With everyone apparently intent upon erasing him, it didn't make too much difference where he died. And he would certainly prefer death in space rather than in some back alley.

"Okay, baby, I'll pilot this tub. But you'd better be ready to get out and push!"

He turned to go forward, then stopped as if remembering something. "You realize that this ship is strictly contraband, don't you?"

She nodded. "So?"

"So we simply cannot pass the Geiger Check."

"Then we shall blast off without it," she replied, woman-like.

Pell laughed harshly. "Before we reach the Heavside the planet-mounted blasters will fry us to a cinder!"

She was still unperturbed. "Then you must figure a way to get us off without that happening," she replied. "After all, you're the pilot."

Pell spread his hands helplessly. "Ah, woman, thy logic is flawless," he muttered half-aloud.

Thoughtfully he looked through the waist port at the liner which had almost completed loading. An idea struck him. He turned to the girl again.

"Get Heintz and harness yourselves in those shock suits. And use these shock chairs in the waist—they're safer. We will blast off the instant that liner does."

IN SPITE of the iron control which had kept her face impassive, Gret Helmuth gasped.

"Do you think we can evade the planet-mounteds by that means?" she asked, her outlander accent very apparent.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. They won't be able to shoot even if they track us both all the way to the Heavside because they won't know which one is us. But when we hit Heavside, they'll know—our ship will be pushing 20 G's and the liner a miserable four. We should be out of their range by then, though. However, don't count on it too much—we'll have every DIC warship in the system on our tail and we may have to fight

yet." He turned and disappeared up the little passage-way.

In the control room Pell wriggled awkwardly into the ungainly shock suit that would enable him to live during tremendous accelerations. Squeezing in behind the massive board, he seated himself in the throne-like shock chair and flipped on the intercom.

"Pell to waist . . . can you hear me?"

"Gotcha," the voice of Heintz came over. "We're ready."

"Are the blasters on this tub armed, Heintz?"

"Yeah. Armed 'em myself this afternoon."

"Cross your fingers . . . Pell out."

Briefly the electros shrieked up the scale to inaudibility followed by the muffled, reluctant keening of the converter. Pell looked through the forward plastine observation shield. The liner was also warming up its converters; occasionally a shower of red-hot cinders flew out of the blast pit as the pilot gunned his converters. Any minute now . . . there it was!

Slowly the huge liner wallowed from its elevated cradle cushioned on a pillar of blue flame. Pell opened his own feed valves a trifle and his primitive converter responded nicely, thrusting the Mark III out of its cradle and up after the passenger liner. Slowly Pell advanced the feed, trying to match the liner's lift. Presently he lost sight of the liner as its speed mounted, but he was familiar with the trajectory it used and he followed it at four G's.

His vizer light was blinking an angry red. He flipped it on and the corpulent, blotched face of a petty official blossomed out of the gray nothingness of the screen.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" he blustered at Pell. "If you do not decelerate at once, I shall order the planet-mounteds to fire on you!"

Pell tried to force a blank look on his face. "What do you mean, sir? This is a DIC passenger liner headed for Mars. Didn't we pass the Geiger Check?"

The official looked sick. Then his face became an enraged, mottled red. "If you think you can get away with this . . ." he sputtered.

Pell laughed at him and flipped the vizer off. He looked at his instruments

... another minute now. The back of his shoulders crawled as he contemplated the unpleasant possibility of a planet-mounted blaster burning the little ship to a cinder. Over his vizi-phone he heard the official trying to contact the liner. Again he looked quickly at his instruments. Now!

Savagely he opened the converter feed valves and the little ship leaped forward. His fingers played with practiced ease on the jet keys, forcing the ship into a wildly spiralling trajectory. Its path soon resembled a jagged fork of lightning. Let 'em try to get a fix on that, he reflected.

Far off to his left he fancied he saw the dim, almost-spent radiance of a blaster probing for him. Laughing to himself, he straightened the course of the ship and piled on the acceleration. Like the second hand of a clock, the acceleration dial moved up the scale.

An eye-searing 12 G's . . . then 15 . . . 18 . . . Finally the needle came to quivering rest at a lung-torturing, bone-crushing 20 G's. The converter screamed just above audio-frequency. The wheezy thing seemed to be pushing like a little trooper, Pell reflected.

His inter-com cracked for a moment, then he heard the labored voice of Gret Helmut.

"Nice work, Pell. Do you think there will be any more trouble getting out of the system?"

"No, but hold tight, just in case. How's Heintz?"

"He's . . . asleep."

Pell grunted to himself. He was worried about the fat man; the acceleration wouldn't do his heart much good. He tried to settle back in his shock suit more comfortably, then realized that the acceleration held him like a vice. Already the oil-cushioned buoyancy pads seemed to thrust into him like spikes. Breathing deeply, he manipulated the massagers in his shock suit.

Just beyond Orbit Luna, Pell gradually swung the nose of the ship toward the nadir of the solar elliptic and the ship streaked out of the system. Turning up the detectors to full sensitivity, Pell tried to relax and sleep—because sleep was actually the only thing to do under tremendous accelerations.

PAINFULLY Pell awoke. He let his eyes flicker over the instruments and nodded with satisfaction as he saw that the ship's velocity had reached 400 miles per second. Stiffly he cut the converter to one G and locked in the robot controls. Instantly the tremendous weight was removed from his body. He shrugged out of his shock suit with every bone in his body aching in discord.

When he had clambered through the narrow passage-way to the waist he saw that Gret was likewise divesting herself of the cumbersome garment.

"We're pushing 400 a second now," he reported. "In another 20 hours we can drop into hyper-space. How's it going back here?"

Gret indicated Heintz who seemed to be asleep. But the ragged gasps of his breathing belied this; Pell knew he was unconscious.

"He's been like this since blast-off—his heart, I believe," she stated matter-of-factly.

Pell frowned. "I was afraid of that. We'd better give him some amytal."

He rummaged around in the medical kit and brought out a hypo. He jabbed Heintz and eased him back into his harness. The fat man's breath became more relaxed and even. Then a question occurred to Pell.

"By the way, why didn't you let me know over the inter-com that Heintz was in this shape?" he asked her.

"You would have cut acceleration and we would have lost time—maybe even have been blasted. If the same thing had happened to me, Heintz would have acted as I did." Her soft, tanned features were hard and single-minded determination blazed from her eyes.

"Pell," she continued, "if I don't come through this, you must deliver the U-235 one way or another."

Pell considered that "one way or another". It sounded ominous and he wondered what it meant. He asked her.

She answered bluntly. "DIC has a swarm of blockaders covering the planet. Nothing can get in or out, except with the greatest risk."

"Have you got any ideas?" he asked.

"No. We are depending on you for that. But there is one way that can't fail.

We can drop into hyper-space, evade them, and drop out over the planet. The U-235 is indestructible. They'll find it in the wreckage."

She said it so simply that Pell shuddered in spite of himself. It was nothing more than a proposal of suicide. To drop from hyper-space in the neighborhood of any mass would set up a space-strain that would crush their ship like an egg.

He looked at her thoughtfully. Even in her rough plasto cover-all she was strikingly beautiful. But blue eyes that should have been soft and deep were hard and icy with determination. Her delicate red lips were crushed in a straight brutal line and a beautifully molded chin was out-thrust stubbornly.

Pell chuckled, then said, "You don't seem to remember that you are dealing with a drunken bum whom you picked out of a gutter, Gret. But even though I don't claim to have any ideals and principles, I am a space pilot, not a kamikaze. If there is no better way than that, we won't do it."

She stared at him with disgust in her eyes. "I thought you were a man, not a coward!"

The words stung Pell. Savagely he gripped her arm and snarled, face close to her, "I don't give two cents for your paltry revolution and I certainly don't intend to die in it. Furthermore, I don't particularly give a damn for you and your refrigerated ways. But then I suppose all of you colonial peasant women are of the same mold." He sneered.

Whack.

His face stung and his eyes smarted from the strength of her slap. Her eyes blazed at him furiously.

"Faradson is depending on this Uranium. It will get to him regardless of the means." She produced the ancient automatic pistol. "If there is no other way, I shall force you to do my bidding with this!"

Pell looked at her contemptuously, turned, and groped back to the control room. When he shrugged into his shock suit, she entered similarly clad. She still held the weapon and her eyes were icy. Her mouth twitched out of control. She seated herself in the shock chair beside him, saying nothing.

Pell switched his gaze from the dials before him to her face. With a leisurely motion he reached out, took her pistol, and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'm getting tired of that thing, baby," he said.

He turned his attention back to the maze of instruments spread before him on the control board and spoke to the girl again without looking up.

"You want speed? Well, baby, you'll get it, regardless of our fat friend back there!"

He jerked his thumb back at the waist. The craft leaped forward, slamming him back into the shock chair. The indicators trembled in their pads and the acceleration needle registered 23 G's.

PELL'S HEAD throbbed in rhythm to the shriek of the overworked converter. He goaded his tired eyes to pierce the pain haze that filmed them. The acceleration was more than 600 miles per second. His bones had lead for marrow; each of his joints was a separate discord in a cacophony of pains that tortured him. Bending his will with a great effort, he cut the converter to one G.

Instantly the body-smashing weight lifted from him. For several moments he did not try to move. His heart raced madly as the pressure was removed from it. Pell breathed deeply and looked at the girl. She was slumped forward in the shock chair but even as he looked at her, she began to stir. In spite of himself, Pell felt a twinge of respect for her.

He busied himself with the Thelmar Distorter Field. This would enable the craft to drop into extra-dimensional space, so to speak, by wrapping of folding space about itself. Working rapidly, Pell shot an orbit in the celestial globe, computed it, and jotted some figures down on a pad.

He looked over his shoulder at the girl. "We'll have to fall free for a moment to go into hyper-space, so brace yourself."

He cut the converter entirely and his stomach reacted like that of a diver with the bends. It almost literally tied itself in knots. The girl moaned in pain and grasped the sides of the shock chair. Pell's jaw hardened as he wound up the Thelmar Generator to build up the field

about the ship. The familiar stars danced and flickered; then disappeared. He sighed and stepped up the converter to one G acceleration.

He arose from his chair wearily and shrugged from his heavy suit. Addressing the girl behind him, he said, "We won't be needing these things for awhile. You had better go back to the waist and look at Heintz."

Pell turned and looked at her. She was watching him curiously. Her face was strained and lines were etched deeply about her mouth. Her eyes were no longer cold; they were very tired.

"You're a strange man, Pell," she said at length. "I am sorry about . . . about that business of awhile ago."

Pell smiled. "I am sorry, too, Gret."

For the first time since he had known her, Gret Helmuth smiled. It was a warm smile and it did strange things to Pell. Before she could reply to his peace offering, his arms were around her and he kissed her. She seemed to respond instinctively for a moment, then pushed him away.

She laughed and said cynically, "That was a rather obvious development, wasn't it?" She disappeared down the narrow passage-way to the waist.

Pell savored the memory of her lips for a moment, then grimaced to himself. She was right, of course.

He exhaled a cloud of smoke and watched its tendrils stream around the control panel and fluff against the plastine observation shield. He tried not to look at the blackness outside because it hurt his eyes. Men had been known to go mad from looking too long at the alien strangeness of this extra-dimensional space which was not for human eyes. Its very nothingness seemed to twist at one's mind.

He glanced at his instruments, then at the celestial navigation globe. In normal space the ship had traveled some four and one-third light years. But in hyperspace it had moved very little during the two hours it had been under the Thelmard.

He turned to Gret. "We've arrived—at least that's what this thing says." He patted the globe. "How's Heintz?"

"Okay now. I gave him some more amytal."

"Umm. That's dangerous stuff — be careful," Pell said. "We're going to fall free again—watch it!"

He cut the converter and deftly cranked up the detectors to full sensitivity. Then he held his breath as he cut the Thelmard and dropped out of hyperspace for an instant. He jumped in spite of himself as all hell broke loose. The detector alarm clamored deafeningly and its red light blinked feverishly.

Throwing up the Thelmard again, Pell turned to the girl and mopped his brow. "I don't think they caught us on their own detectors, but we almost dropped out in their laps." He grinned.

"We now have a first class, double-barreled problem on our hands. This bucket has momentum amounting to about 600 miles per second. We've got to get rid of that. But if we do it too soon the DIC boys will be able to match our speed. And if we do it too late, we'll make quite a puddle on Centaura."

"Naturally," he went on, "they've concentrated most of their strength at zenith and nadir. So we'll drop out of hyperspace in the elliptic and try to fall in free from there. They won't be able to detect us for quite a while and they won't be able to match our 600 miles per second in time to catch us. But I'm afraid we'll have to run the gauntlet of DIC cruisers already in position."

He glanced at her. Excitement burned two red spots high on her cheeks.

III

SIXTY-FIVE MILLION MILES out beyond the huge red ball of Centauri VI the small space ship suddenly dropped into normal space. It pitched drunkenly, every separate member of its construction squealing in protest. Pell realized they were all too close to mass, but it couldn't be helped.

At 600 miles per second the ship hurtled toward Centaura, steadily eating up the distance. He cut the converter and every other power source in the ship except the detector sensitives which he fastened to his wrists. On DIC radar the little Mark III would be a black speck, unnoticeable against the huge disc of Centauri VI, and the backlash of enemy

radiation detectors combined with their Heisenberg Factors ruled that method out unless their ships were within a range of 500,000 miles.

The pale glow of the Alpha Centauri sun shed a dim illumination about the control room. Pell turned to Gret and grinned recklessly at her. "You'll have to put up with 72 hours of this—then the fun begins."

The slight motion of his head propelled his weightless body out of the shock chair in which he had been sprawled. He instinctively extended his arm to stop his upward motion and touched Gret's hand. He pulled it slightly and she rose gently from the chair and into his arms.

There was warmth in her lips, but even more in her kisses.

The detector sensitives fastened to Pell's wrists had been twinging more frequently and more painfully. They were less than five million miles from their goal—only three hours from the blue-green disc that blossomed and expanded even as they watched it in the screen.

"Better put on your shock suit, Gret. We've come as far as it is safe—we've got to decelerate now," he said.

Grunting with annoyance, he tried to shrug himself into the weightless garment which slithered about in his grasp. He flipped on the suit's power and sighed with satisfaction at the gentle kneading of the massagers. He clipped his liquid-cushioned eye-stops in place and squeezed into his seat, putting on the helmet.

"Ready now, Pell," Gret's voice came out over the inter-com.

Pell grunted and began to wind up the converter. Somewhere deep in the ship's bowels it began to sing up the scale as the starter electros were clutched in. His detector began to clack and clatter busily as its relays responded to the impact of DIC radar which converged on the ship. Pell smiled mirthlessly as he fed full converter thrust to the braking jets and waited expectantly for the detector to give him the alarm.

It did so—soon.

The red warning lights flickered and the alarm clamored intermittently up and down the scale. They had his position and orbit now.

The minutes of waiting piled up with agonizing slowness. Pell turned down the sensitives of the detector. Its constant shrilling assaulted his ear-drums painfully. Steadily he fed braking thrust to the forward jets until the needle stood at a body-battering 19 G's. He turned up the oxygen flow in his helmet with a flexing of his cheek muscles. His backbone felt as if it were in imminent danger of being forced through his body and blackness hung just off the edges of his vision.

Somewhere out there in that star-studded blackness was the enemy. The main body was not in detector range yet, but it was there, nevertheless. Jockeying into position, warming up their blasters, swinging turrets to hair-line accuracy and waiting . . . waiting . . .

His detector clattered determinedly now. Pell glanced at it. A brief smile flitted over his hard, tensed features. At least two were out of range.

Experimentally he flicked his blaster switch and was pleased with the deadly cones of blue radiance which flickered from the gun snouts.

There! And there! Converging above and below the nose of his ship were swarms of deadly little two-man Mark IX's. Dimly he could make out in the detector screen the deadly blue lattice-work of blaster beams that awaited him.

Under this pressure his mind worked like a machine with the speed of light, analyzing, rejecting, planning, replanning . . . As they blew up in size with fantastic speed on the screen, Pell acted like lightning. In a blurring motion he cut the converter, fell free for an instant, wound up the converter to the aft jets and thrust up—up, and suddenly out of range.

But the enemy had anticipated his move. As he eased the thrust from the aft jets, two points of light twinkled and blossomed in the duration of a single heart-beat into his screen. A pair of DIC fighters! And they had him like a cold pigeon!

FOR one brief instant Pell was paralyzed and that was long enough for the enemy. The whistling *whoosh* of air escaping through a rent in the hull died away as the automatic self-sealers went

into action, but it gave vivid testimony of the enemy's aim.

Reacting like a coiled spring, Pell jabbed his blaster switch, catching one of the DIC fighters squarely in his sights. It seemed to fall to pieces in the midst of the minor nova of its own disintegration. The second enemy fighter flashed past like a bullet, but not before Pell chewed off half its aft jets with his blasters.

For a moment he was in the clear. Quickly he examined the function dials; found to his dismay that his aft jets were nothing more than slag now, with all the tube connections severed.

"What . . . what happened?" Gret gasped.

"We've been in a fight, baby, and we got a black eye," Pell cracked. "But don't worry—I'll set this can down in spite of those missing jets."

He bent over his instruments again, a furrow slowly forming between his brows. That fight had taken time—too much valuable time. He had just two hours to decelerate from the tremendous velocity of the ship to the comparative slow velocity of Centauri V.

Discarding the last of his caution, he crammed all the braking thrust possible on the ancient converter. Up—up went the gravity needle; up past the red line at 23 G's; up past a heart-wracking 27 G's; up to an inconceivable thirty gravities where it quivered sluggishly.

Pell's body weighed over two and a half tons! His eyes weighed five pounds each and thrust agonizingly against their liquid cushion transparent stops. The converter screamed its super-sonic thunder, setting the separate members of the ship's body to vibrating madly. Every moment was red-hazed agony of an eon's duration; every second a year of exquisite pain.

The blue-green disc of Centauri V expanded visibly in the screen. Even through the observation shield Pell could make out its crescent. The brake jets were doing their work—but it would be a near thing—a very near thing. Pell prayed that there would be no more fighters; aside from the fact that he couldn't maneuver, he could still less afford to lose the time.

When the ball of Centaura puffed over all the screen and its edges were no longer visible, Pell broadcast the prearranged signal of recognition to the planet-mounted blaster batteries below. Scrambled almost beyond analysis and recognition, the acknowledging signal came back.

Suddenly Pell realized that Centaura's curvature had ballooned to flatness and on the heels of that realization came the whispering, high-pitched wail of a ship travelling at high velocity in thin atmosphere. Rapidly the wail became an ear-shattering, sustained screech and the small warning lights of the hull thermometers began to glow redly.

Nose *outward*, rather than pointed *down*, Pell continued to brake the ship with all forward thrust, depending upon the planet's attraction to prevent him from hurtling off into space on a tangent and into the jaws of the DIC fleet.

Pell never remembered how many times he blacked out, nor how many revolutions of the planet he made. Shaking the ever encroaching blackness from the borders of his vision, Pell had a fleeting memory of a heavily-forested mountain flashing by beneath, followed by a fertile plateau, a river, then mountains rising ahead.

Streaking over these with a cushion of fire thrust before it, the ship hurtled at a visibly slower pace down a rocky gorge with jagged mountains on each side. Then, decelerated almost to a stop, the battered space ship seemed to poise for an instant, then turned over gently and gouged a deep furrow in the soft ground. For perhaps 400 yards it smashed through low timber and came to a halt at the brink of a small stream where the scream of rending metal finally died away.

The last thing Pell remembered was cutting out the converter.

IV

PELL WAS FIRST CONSCIOUS OF time—a duration between the recurring sequence of pain jags. Gradually the pain left him to be transformed into a dull ache which encompassed his whole body. Every separate nerve end seemed to shoot subtle, rapid messages to his cortex, announcing that they were not feeling well.

He opened his eyes; blinked them several times to shake the web of blackness from them. He tried to move. Pure, unadulterated anguish backlashed at him. With a mighty effort he concentrated his will on the task of overcoming the surging wash of pain.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, gritting his teeth as agony swelled his head. The ship was a crumpled mass of smoking wreckage. Pell noticed dully through one of the shattered ports that it had scorched the area in which it lay and its path through the low timber was charred and black.

Suddenly he realized it was hot inside the shock suit—very hot. He stooped over Gret and picked her up. He tried the airlock in the waist; it was jammed shut. But further aft he found a gaping rent in the ship's metal skin. Gently he lowered her still form through it.

He returned to the waist and unharnessed Heintz from the shock chair. Pell realized that the fat man was too ponderous for him to lift; hence he dragged him awkwardly to the rent in the ship and stuffed him through unceremoniously. Stopping only to pick up the kit of medical supplies, Pell followed.

He stripped off his shock suit and looked at Gret anxiously. He took off her helmet and saw that her face was very pale. Gingerly he pulled her out of the heavy suit and felt in the medical kit for a stimulant. Her gold-blond hair fell across his arm lightly as he administered the hypo. A touch of color began to come into her cheeks beneath the tan and she breathed more easily.

He turned to Heintz and wrestled for a minute or two with his huge body, trying to extricate it from the suit. The fat man's body sagged lifelessly as if his joints were made of jelly. Cursing under his breath, Pell upended him and dragged off the bulky garment.

Reaching for his wrist, Pell found his pulse with some difficulty. Heintz still lived, but the accelerated shallow pumping of his heart indicated that something would have to be done in a hurry. Hastily Pell jabbed his arm with a hypo and watched Heintz anxiously until he felt his pulse pick up with greater strength.

Sudden reaction hit Pell and he sat down heavily. For the first time he noticed their

surroundings. The crushed wreck of the little space ship was poised on the brink of a small stream and faintly Pell heard it tumbling over rapids in the distance. The stream disappeared around a small rise in ground and to the right and left at a distance of perhaps five miles, Pell could make out rocky escarpments of a mighty range of mountains clearly defined in the light of the late afternoon sun. The air had a distinct chill in it and Pell was on the point of returning to the ship to try to salvage some garments when he heard Gret Helmuth gasp. He bent over her as her eyes opened.

"Pell . . . did we make it?" she asked painfully.

He smoothed the hair from her face tenderly and grinned. "Yeah, we made it. But there isn't much left of the ship."

She tried to rise from her prone position and half succeeded when she fell back with a moan.

PELL laughed and said, "I wouldn't try that so soon, Gret. Better let the corpuscles splash around before you do it again."

He made as if to rise, touching her hand. Instinctively it tightened on his and he settled beside her again. The Centauri sky was a deep cobalt blue and the wind was keen and bracing. He felt in his jumper pocket for a couple of cigarettes and his atomic lighter. The novelty's vicious looking, hazy blue flame made Gret jump in spite of herself and Pell grinned.

At length the girl spoke. "Pell, I don't like the idea of waiting around here. I mean . . . well, I have a feeling that something is wrong."

Pell glanced at her. It was plain to see that she was worried and uncertain; he could almost feel it as a tangible thing.

"How do you mean?" he asked her.

"Well . . . for one thing, these hills. We're somewhere in the Cheon Range and there were remnants of DIC mercenaries dug in here when I left. They were holding out in an abandoned blaster tower around here somewhere. If they should happen to be in the neighborhood—" She shrugged.

Pell felt a distinct chill settle down the base of his spine. "If your Insurgents are worth their U-235, they've tracked us on

their radar. They should be here any minute," he said reassuringly.

He rose and clambered into the ship through the rent in its side in order to salvage some outer garments because the air was becoming colder. When he returned from the ship to the place where Gret lay, he noticed that she was trembling—and not from the cold.

"What's the matter, baby?" he asked, concerned.

She tried to smile at him. "We outlanders are a queer bunch, Pell. We . . . we hear things. There are men—many men down the valley and they are fighting. Both groups want to capture this ship." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "But—"

A memory of long-dead hackles rose along the back of Pell's neck. Shadows were growing longer and in the west he could see Alpha Centauri poised over the rocky rim of the mountain, ready to plunge beneath.

SUDDENLY he heard it. Far down the valley carved in the living rocks by the small stream came the sound of firing. And it was moving closer. He looked at Gret who had scrambled to her feet; evidently she had 'heard' this long before him. Silently he handed her the huge automatic pistol which he had taken from her in the ship and tightened his hand on the butt of the tiny blaster which he had taken from the body of the DIC assassin whom she had killed that first night.

Breathing hard, they dragged Heintz to the lee of their ship to shelter him from the fire. Then they waited. In the waning glow of the last of the sunlight the woods off to the right took on an ominous appearance. They could hear the sound of shooting quite plainly now, interspersed with faint shouting. It carried well in the air which had become bitterly cold. Pell strained his eyes in the direction of the firing and for an instant he fancied he could see flashes. But which side was which?

Suddenly Gret grabbed at his arm and motioned violently behind them on the other side of the wrecked ship. Pell swore softly and crawled swiftly around the slag heap of the aft jets, blaster in hand. Dimly he could make out figures hurrying

toward the ship in the cover of the trees.

"Stop!" he called.

A bomb exploding among them could have had no greater effect. They began to run helter-skelter for the ship, the weapons in their hands leaping into life. The ragged hack and roar of their machine-guns and pistols momentarily stunned Pell, but, recovering, he let loose with his blaster. Its cone of blue radiance was bright in the gathering dusk and Pell knew he had given up his position immediately, but he had no choice. The running figures seemed to falter and fall in heaps—then his blaster failed! Rapidly he checked it and found to his dismay that the tiny thing needed recharging.

All at once the attackers were on top of him—and behind him! The thunderous bark of Gret's automatic was suddenly stilled and on the heels of that knowledge, Pell was dealt a staggering blow on the head from behind.

Rough hands dragged him to his feet and dimly he realized he was surrounded by a group of ragged, heavily-armed men. They looked at him curiously, fingering their weapons uneasily. Finally a large man with gimlet eyes came up to the group. He had an air of authority and the men fell back with deference.

The large man looked at him closely and smiled. "Pell! I might have known they'd have hired you. What did you bring us, Pell?"

Pell reeled. This man was Raul Gutridge, the man who had crushed him out of business for the DIC. As a reward, DIC gave him what was thought to be a soft job, that of commander of the colonial garrison on Centaura.

Before he could answer, however, the large man had turned on his heel and was surveying the demolished ship. "Wrecking ships as usual, I see," he remarked with mock pleasantry. "No wonder your license was revoked."

Pell realized one thing and only that. He must keep Gutridge out of the ship! He could not let him find the U-235. Because with it, Gutridge, in spite of his few numbers, could mop up the planet in only a few days. The big man had ruined him once before; he must not be allowed to triumph again.

"Times are tough for unlicensed space pilots on Earth," Pell began casually. "You've got to work to eat. So I took the job of running these two through the blockade."

"What two?" Gutridge asked, seeing only Gret.

Pell cursed himself. He had blundered again. Silently he indicated the fat man sprawled under the ship.

Gutridge walked over to the recumbent Heintz and kicked him a couple of times, but without succeeding in arousing him. Then he looked up at Pell again.

"Still can't lie worth a damn, can you, Pell?" he observed. "I trust you will pardon me while I look in the ship?"

Pell watched helplessly as he entered the ship. If only the Insurgents would arrive in time!

When Gutridge came out, Pell knew he had discovered the secret. He moved slowly, as if in a dream. For once his narrow gimlet eyes were wide as he looked dazedly at his men. Then he pulled himself up and turned to Pell solemnly. All he said was one word, but it shattered all meaning and all reality for Pell.

That word was, "Thanks!"

THE SOUND of firing from downstream was much clearer and louder now. Gutridge looked over his shoulder with a trace of anxiety and nodded to one of his men. "Callen," he ordered, "take my guests back to the tower and entertain them until I return. You'll have to carry this one—but it won't be for nothing. I have something special in store for them."

Pell and Gret were yanked roughly away from their ship, while four men labored heavily with the vast bulk of the fat man. After winding along an obscure path in the woods, they emerged to find a steep cliff facing them. The tortuous path rose sharply up its side.

"Hell!" one of the mercenaries panted. "Callen, we ought to chuck this elephant over the cliff."

"Keep luggin' him," Callen directed. "The chief said he had a treat for 'em." He laughed unpleasantly.

Pell shot a glance over his shoulder. Gret was trudging apathetically behind

him. A pall of black discouragement fell over Pell. Hopelessly he berated the ironic twist of fate which had delivered them into the hands of the DIC mercenaries. To think that they had gone through hell, only to deliver the U-235 to the enemy after all—better to have died out there than this!

It was completely dark when the tired group of prisoners and guards arrived at the encampment. The dim light of Centauri's half-risen moon allowed Pell to make out a few details of the place. He realized that it was nothing more than an abandoned planet-mounted blaster tower. But the warrens in its base provided quite effective dug-outs for its defense.

Pell and Gret were escorted to one of the lower levels of the blaster tower itself. There they were shoved into a hard, bare room and Heintz was dumped on the floor. The door closed behind them.

Heintz began to groan. The coldness of the floor added to the stiffness already present in his joints. Pell bent over him anxiously. The fat man had gone through a terrific strain and his recovery was quite vociferous. Pell wondered how he could explain to him their bad luck. Black despair seized him again as the fat man looked about their bare room uncomprehendingly. Haltingly Pell explained. Gret Helmuth didn't even bother to look up.

"... but as long as we are still alive, we can fight them," Pell finished, trying to keep the hopelessness out of his voice.

Finally Heintz looked up at him. "You *would* have to land us right in the middle of the DIC, wouldn't you?" he snarled.

Then almost immediately he was sorry. "Forget it, Pell. You couldn't help it."

For a long time they remained silent. Pell grasped the girl's hand in his own, but said nothing. She looked up at him. Her eyes were empty and the tiny lines of strain about her mouth seemed to have been etched more deeply than ever. Pell vowed to himself that he could erase those lines in spite of everything that was arrayed against them. He kissed her and she responded absently.

Suddenly she buried her head under his chin and embraced him tightly. For a moment he thought she was sobbing, but she looked up at him, clear eyed and determined.

"I love you, Pell," she said softly. "If . . . if we—"

Pell knew what she was going to say and shushed her gently with his big hand over her mouth. He was about to speak when he was interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps in the corridor outside. Gutridge entered, his face flushed with triumph.

"You are indeed kind, Pell," he said mockingly. "Five kilos are more than enough for our little task. You will be well rewarded." He laughed.

Pell guessed only too well what the reward would be. Death! Death for all of them. He felt a surge of bitter hate for Gutridge's mocking face. He wanted to batter it to a red pulp with his fists.

Raul Gutridge smiled infuriatingly and turned to Gret. "I believe you know of Major Dallard, do you not?" he asked her. "That was his yokel militia outfit we were scrapping with at the ship. I'm going to save you for a while—I want to give you a lesson in military tactics. I intend to show you the tactical hopelessness of attacking an enemy armed with atomic weapons."

Like an angry cat she lashed out at him, striking him across the face. Her nails left four bleeding welts. "You . . . you sadist!" she burst out helplessly.

Gutridge moved toward her angrily. At the same instant Pell sprang at him like a coiled spring. Gutridge reeled back as Pell's flying body staggered him. Two of the guards at his side, caught unawares for an instant, jumped on Pell and threw him to the floor. They kicked him a couple of times, then yanked him to his feet and dragged him through the door after Heintz.

Dazed, Pell realized that he and Heintz were being separated from the girl. He remembered that Gutridge had not left the room with them, but had remained with Gret. A wave of hate for the DIC mercenary washed over him, choking him.

V

AS THEY REACHED THE ground level of the tower and prepared to descend into its unknown depths, Pell could hear firing in the distance. They were using weapons that had been

obsolete for three hundred years. In spite of what Gret had said, Pell had not really comprehended the significance of her statements in that respect. He was bitter at the shrewdly ruthless policy of the Earth Government. Gutridge wasn't joking when he said the colonials under Dallard wouldn't have a chance when he got his atomics into action. If only Dallard could fight into the fortress in time . . .

But even as the thought flitted through his mind, he crushed it out. Dallard would need days, not hours, to penetrate this labyrinth.

For perhaps ten minutes they were escorted deeper and deeper into the underground fortress. The twisting passageways threw Pell's sense of direction for a loss immediately, but he did remember the long descent in an auto-dropper before they reached the level of their prison.

Finally they turned off into a side corridor which was damp and illuminated only faintly. The walls as he brushed against them were cold to the touch. One of the guards opened a door in the seemingly blank surface of a wall and grunted at Pell.

Shrugging, Pell followed Heintz inside and turned just in time to see the heavy metal door slide back into place.

Sighing, Heintz lowered his vast bulk to the cement floor and surveyed the cell gloomily. Then he looked up at Pell and said, "Boy, if this ain't a mess! If I know anything about atomics, we got about two hours to figure a way out of this clink. Gutridge has one technician who's a genius when it comes to atomics—guy named Bede. That devil will have those blasters ready in no time."

Pell swore to himself and nervously paced the cell looking for a ventilator opening—anything that would allow him to gain egress from the cell. His eyes roved restlessly along the walls seeking for a fault or opening in its maddeningly smooth surface. At last he found the vents—a small series of holes located high in the wall opposite the door. Straining on tip-toes, he managed to insert his little finger in one of them, only to meet with a steel mesh screen inside.

Cursing fluently, he flopped down beside Heintz on the floor and stared moodily at his surroundings. The fat man be-

side him was morosely searching his pockets for a cigarette. He found one at last and began to tinker with his cranky lighter. Pell watched him curiously as he fumbled with its primitive flint. Taking pity on him, Pell produced his own lighter, flicked the stud and held it toward Heintz. The fat man jumped and looked at him reproachfully.

"Say!" he protested, "Don't scare me like . . . like . . ." He broke off, his eyes wide with the dawn of an idea.

"Pell!" he blurted eagerly, "that thing will cut through these walls like butter!"

"Huh?" Pell grunted, startled.

"Yeah," Heintz asserted excitedly. "That gadget of yours will carve out the lock on that door in two shakes."

"Through *decyte* alloy? Not in your life time!" Pell replied sadly.

"Hell, bright boy, you ain't in an Earth jail. Those walls are steel, nothing more."

It was Pell's turn to be excited. Hastily he rose to his feet and approached the door. He examined the metal surface and saw that the fat man was correct.

THOUGHTFULLY he looked at the lighter in his hand. On Earth it was nothing more than a triviality—a novelty that could be acquired anywhere. But here! Yes, here it might be a means to salvation. There was just a chance, he reflected. The whole culture on Centaura seemed to be geared on a pre-atomic level of technology except for the blaster towers. And even the builders of those fabulous machines for defense never considered the possibility that they might be attacked from within. Such things as atomic lighters on Centaura were not dreamed of; jail cells would not be constructed of *decyte* alloys that could resist their weak blasts. He looked at the black metal cylinder in his hand; flicked it tentatively and smiled at its short blue flame.

Holding his breath, Pell felt along the lock edge of the door for indentations that would indicate the critical bolt joints. But it was completely smooth and he was able to find nothing.

"Whatcha think?" Heintz asked from behind him.

Pell shushed him frantically. "Pretty good, I think. But don't speak so loudly—

I don't know whether there's a guard out there."

He bent to the edge of the door and pressed the stud of the lighter. Its small beam began to chew into the steel sheeting around the lock. With agonizing slowness the beam cut into the steel until it reached a depth beyond which it would not penetrate. Pell released the stud and tinkered with the lighter with the thin edge of a coin.

(Then he directed it again at the door. Its seemingly innocuous blue flame was brighter and longer. It cut into the steel with renewed vigor.

Suddenly there was a small snap and the door slid slowly back into the wall. Pell crouched, ready to spring upon the guard. But there was none. The corridor was empty and silent as a tomb. Pell glanced at his watch and the need for haste was pressed more firmly than ever upon him. An hour gone by already!

He crept cautiously into the corridor with Heintz on his heels. It was dim and damp; the moisture seemed to congeal on his brow like sweat. With Heintz dogging his footsteps like some huge, bloated shadow, Pell approached the main corridor. It, too, was deserted.

He turned to Heintz and asked in a low voice, "Where do you think they keep the atomic weapons?"

Heintz shrugged and grunted, "Probably on some higher level—some place they could reach in a hurry from the tower. Pell, if we could grab one of those blasters . . ." He left the thought unfinished, but Pell knew what he was thinking.

They reached the main corridor. Cautiously Pell looked up and down its long, deserted length. The lines about his mouth were tense and hard. If they should be caught—he motioned for Heintz to follow.

They had not gone more than fifty feet on the main corridor toward the automatic elevators when one of them suddenly opened and out stepped a uniformed DIC mercenary!

Pell sighed under his breath and muttered to Heintz, "Pay no attention to him—just keep walking as casually as you can. When we reach him, we'll jump him and take his guns."

There was a single affirmative grunt from his rear. Pell watched the soldier tensely while the latter regarded them with a blank and incurious stare as he approached them. Suddenly a flash of suspicion crossed the mercenary's eyes and he slowed his pace uncertainly. Pell was no more than twenty feet from him when he charged, Heintz lumbering at his heels.

With an oath, the mercenary dragged at the heavy automatic pistol at his side. The impact of Pell's body sent him sprawling to the hard surface of the corridor. Like a cat, Pell scrambled on top of him and proceeded to throttle out the cries of the soldier. Heintz pulled him roughly aside and picked up the soldier with one hairy paw on the collar of his jacket and the other over his face, completely eclipsing it.

Swiftly Pell snatched the man's pistol from its holster and slipped it into his pocket. Then he unslung the soldier's machine-gun and handed it to Heintz. Motioning toward the auto-dropper from which the mercenary had just stepped, Pell helped Heintz shove the struggling soldier inside and let the door slide shut.

Heintz released the enemy soldier who immediately began to howl loudly. The fat man shook him and he ceased his useless cries. Terrified, he looked from Heintz to Pell and back again.

"Where's the atomic armory?" Pell asked.

The man remained silent.

Pell repeated the question more vigorously, but still the man remained silent.

Heintz unslung the captured machine-gun and pointed it at the other. He fumbled curiously at its levers and spoke softly, as if to no one in particular. "I wonder how this thing works—now, if I pull this thing here . . ."

The soldier looked pleadingly at Pell, but he merely yawned and watched disinterestedly.

The man made a strangling noise and capitulated. "Okay, you win. The sixth level—that's up." He looked again at Pell. "Tell that idiot to put that thing away," he pleaded.

Pell didn't answer, but looked at the controls for a moment. Then he pressed the appropriate stud and turned to Heintz.

"I'll cover this fellow while you keep

that gun ready. Just to prevent anything from going wrong, we'll let him walk in front of us with his hands in his pockets and his mouth shut," he said, nodding meaningly at the prisoner.

Heintz grunted and held the machine-gun at ready as the elevator drew to a stop. The door whined open softly and Pell tensed. Before his startled eyes a swarm of men hurried up and down the corridor, apparently too intent upon their business to notice Heintz and Pell.

He was about to let the door close again when Heintz stopped him. He pointed significantly at an instrument that flashed above the heads of the hurrying men. Like lightning Pell realized that it was a Geiger Counter and that it was registering the presence of Uranium!

"Come on, Pell. They won't notice us," Heintz called over his shoulder as he stepped from the cage.

BOLDLY he walked into the corridor and melted unnoticed into the crowd of excited, hurrying soldiers. Pell followed him, his hand on the cool, heavy pistol butt and the enemy prisoner preceding him with his hands sunk in his pockets. As the crowd of men jostled and pushed about him, Pell could hear breathless bits of conversation.

"... blasters—yeah, real atomics. Bede will have 'em in shape in a few minutes."

"... hell, not a chance. Not when we turn those blasters loose."

Pell went slightly sick. He saw that the main stream of men were pouring into a corridor with a dead end. Tightening his hold on the pistol butt in his pocket, he shoved his prisoner after them.

Then he noticed that they were waiting at the heavily-guarded entrance of a room and it dawned upon him that they were about to be issued blasters.

Quickly he surveyed the situation, noting the position of the guards at the room's entrance, and made his decision. Drawing the pistol from his pocket, he jammed it into the captured mercenary's back and began to shoulder his way boldly through the uncomprehending crowd. As he approached the door he saw a surging around it, then suddenly all hell broke loose.

Berada-da-da-da-da-da . . . Instantly

Pell realized that Heintz had already gone into action. The men melted away from the entrance in time to allow Pell to see Heintz shoulder his way through the half-open door. Forgetting his prisoner, Pell jumped past the bodies of three or four guards and entered the room, slamming the heavily reinforced door behind him. Then he whirled, pistol at ready.

There were only four technicians in the armory and they were frozen into an astonished tableau at the sight of a huge, bullet-headed, fat man crouching before them with a machine-gun in his arms. Pell crouched behind him, letting his glance flicker about the room. On the floor were the cadmium and graphite vaults which had been ripped bodily from the ship. Over half of them had been opened and strewn about the tables were an array of hand-blasters undergoing the delicate process of being charged with pellets of U-235.

Pell broke the short silence. "Don't move, any of you! Heintz, pick up a blaster that's charged!"

Heintz shuffled forward cautiously to relieve a swarthy technician of a blaster which had frozen in his hands when they had burst into the room.

"Okay, Bede, gimme that!" Heintz growled, poking his machine-gun toward the technician.

His action seemed to touch off the fuse of a bomb. Suddenly the technician leaped away from Heintz and leveled the blaster in his hands. The other technicians leaped in unison for the tables, snatching up blasters. Heintz fired at Bede, then whirled and loosed a long, sustained burst at the other three.

But he reckoned without Bede who had fallen to the floor wounded, but not dead. With a look of venomous hate he swung the blaster in his hands toward Heintz and pressed the stud. Pell fired at him, once, twice, then again, but even as the heavy automatic crashed in his hand, Bede fired at Heintz.

Heintz exploded. With cataclysmic violence his body had vaporized in a blue-white sheen of impossibly hot atomic radiance.

Pell became violently sick. Recovering, he looked dazedly at the slaughter about him and realized that he alone was left to

deal with the situation. For the first time he understood how great an ally the fat man had been.

Blind, unreasoning hate for the forces of the DIC surged into his mind. He saw Guttridge's mocking face and it added fuel to the rage burning fiercely within him. He recalled vividly that Gret was in his possession and the fires of bitter hate blasted away all remnants of his former caution.

Outside he could hear the mutter of DIC soldiers who were obviously confused by the shooting of the guards and the sound of further shooting inside. Then the steel-reinforced door began to quiver on its hinges.

Pell slowly looked down at the ancient pistol in his hand and laughed to himself. There was no further need for that thing, he reflected. He threw it away from him and walked purposefully over to the body of Bede, the dead technician. Without the slightest hesitation, he rolled the bloody thing over and took the blaster from its lifeless hands.

He looked back at the door. The pounding had stopped, but he saw a little white flame dancing and flickering around the lock. Pell smiled a bit, leveled the blaster in his arms, and depressed the stud.

In an instant the steel door turned a dazzling white and began to run into slag. The vicious, expanding cone of blue flame played on it an instant more and suddenly it exploded into vapor. The knot of mercenaries around the door disintegrated into exploding cinders. Some of them on the outer edges even had time to scream.

VI

ATREMENDOUS FEELING OF power surged in Pell. He strode into the corridor and stood in the midst of the havoc he had created, letting the hungry, hellish blaster play across a few fleeing figures trying to make the elevators. He was unconscious of the overpowering stench in the hot, searing, almost unbreathable air. He didn't notice that the soles of his heavy insulated boots were burning as he stood in the corridor. He realized now only that he held in his hands the instrument that would enable

him to carry out ruthless vengeance against Gutridge and his DIC mercenaries.

The dead-end corridor off which the armory was located opened onto the larger main corridor which led to the elevators. Pell padded silently to the junction and walked boldly toward the automatic elevators which would take him to the surface. He paused just once to let the blaster play over the mouth of the dead-end corridor which led to the blasters. The roof slowly collapsed in a shower of scorched cement, leaving the lacy interwork of the reinforcing girders bare and skeleton-like. The mass of hot rubble effectively sealed off the entrance to the armory—for the time being, at any rate.

With that action, Pell realized that he was a god. Although not an immortal god, certainly a god armed with a terrible destructive force which was not immediately available to the others who might aspire to be gods.

Pell looked at the devastation he had created and became uncertain as to what to do next. Little thought tendrils of unreason whispered at him, telling him to create a reign of terror throughout the multi-leveled warren which was the foundation of the mighty blaster tower. But he closed his mind to their pleasing prospects and his jaw hardened at the thought of the job before him. He must go to the surface and destroy the mercenaries' defense of the fortress. He must help Daldard crack their resistance as soon as possible so that the precious U-235 might be retrieved from its burying place and turned over to the Insurgents.

Pell's eyes narrowed as he turned again to the auto-droppers. There were so many things he would like to do with his weapon, but first things first. Bleak-eyed Gret Helmuth who could become all woman in an instant—she would have to wait. So would Gutridge. But not for long, he promised himself.

He pressed the button which should send one of the cages hurtling to his level, then take him back to the surface. The first time he pressed the button, there was no response. Nor was there the second time. A third time his hand moved impatiently toward the red stud, only to

freeze in the act as a familiar, hated voice began to crackle from some hidden speaker in the walls. It was Gutridge!

"Pell! Pell! Can you hear me?" came the mocking voice. "You're trapped, Pell. The droppers don't seem to respond, do they?"

The deep, penetrating voice chuckled, then went on. "Pretty soon your head will become heavy and your eye-lids will want to drop. You will want to sleep, Pell, because the gas is very powerful. Do you feel it yet? Its nice stuff, Pell. You will want to sleep so much . . . so much."

The heavy voice began to chuckle and its reverberations thundered evilly in the deserted corridors. Pell found the source of the laugh and blasted it furiously from its concealment high in the wall. But from somewhere far down the corridor the powerful laugh echoed ominously.

Fear began to crawl at his throat, constricting it. He must find a stair-way. Surely there must be one! But would he have time? Frantically he ran down the empty corridors blasting open doors as he came to them. At last he found what he sought behind the gaping maw of a blasted panel. Through the coalescing haze of the vaporized door he saw stairs spiraling upward.

He was about to enter when he saw the first tendrils of smoky whiteness reaching for him and plucking at him. Instantly he realized that the heavy stuff was being forced down the stairwell. Holding his breath, he retreated back down the corridor and let loose a blast from the weapon cradled in his arms in an effort to seal up the shattered door. As he retraced his steps back to the elevators, he realized that his head was getting heavy. Vaguely he noticed the milky smoke issuing from the corridor vents and he began to run.

But with each step his body became heavier and heavier and only the greatest effort of will kept him from collapsing on his face. He knew he was trapped. Desperately he goaded his tired mind to discover a means to escape. Reeling, he reached the elevators, dimly conscious of Gutridge's mocking laugh far down the corridor. The white haze was thick and nauseating and it caressed his nostrils with cloying sweetness.

Suddenly Pell saw a group of masked

figures approach in the sound-deadening haze. In what seemed an eternity he brought the blaster up with tired hands and pressed the stud. As if in some horrible nightmare, the figures seemed to shimmer and explode.

Desperately Pell strived to keep his legs under him, but they wobbled in spite of his control and he fell. His arms and legs were mere dead weight; he could no longer force them to do his bidding, not even to the extent of releasing the stud on the blaster. A wave of heat struck him mightily on the face, as if he had been thrust bodily into an atomic furnace. Then from somewhere a draught of cool, pure air played about him, washing the fumes of the nerve gas from his system.

ASTOUNDED, Pell gasped in deep lungfuls of the precious air and painfully stumbled to his feet. Slowly the incredible truth dawned upon him. Accidentally he had blasted open the sliding steel door of the elevator shaft and the cool breath of its untainted air had revived him. Hastily he looked around him, trying to spot more of the enemy creeping through the dense fog toward him. There were none; apparently they had decided to let the gas do its work. They were in for a surprise, Pell reflected.

An idea had occurred to him. He might just possibly escape the trap by climbing up the inside of the elevator shaft. He strained his eyes into the dimness of the shaft and found what he was looking for; a frail-looking steel ladder which extended in both directions up and down the shaft. Looking up, he tried to pierce its puddled blackness but could see nothing. If a dropper should hurtle down out of that blackness, he would be smashed to a bloody pulp. Grimly he thrust the thought out of his mind, slung the blaster over his shoulder, and leaped for the ladder on the far wall of the shaft.

It trembled dangerously as his writhing body struck it and swiftly he began his long climb into the darkness above. For what seemed an eon of agonizing effort, Pell hauled his weary body up the length of the steel ladder. It stretched up and away into an infinity of blackness that housed a sudden and terrible death. As he climbed, Pell strained his senses in the

all-enveloping darkness but could perceive nothing.

Suddenly his hand, groping for another rung, met nothing but emptiness and for one terrifying moment Pell tottered off balance on the ladder. Cautiously he felt about above himself and his hand collided with the underside of a dropper which was suspended just over his head. Had he reached the top? It was impossible to tell in the blackness. He had no choice but to chance it.

Saying a silent prayer, Pell unlimbered the blaster and wrapped himself about the tiny steel ladder as tightly as possible. Then he loosed its devastating radiance at the wall opposite him. The brilliance of its destructive flash blinded him momentarily as he clung tenaciously to the frail ladder which whipped treacherously.

Blessed, precious light filtered in through the shattered door opposite him. Clinging tightly to his blaster, Pell leaped for the opening in spite of the fact that his eyes had not yet adjusted to the sudden light. Pain jagged his eyeballs as his pupils strove to contract but Pell ignored it as he took in his new surroundings with rapid glances.

The corridors of this wide, well-lit level were deserted and the air was free of the deadly gas that had trapped him lower in the labyrinth. Haste was the keynote now. From this point on, regardless of what he did, he must do it quickly and decisively. He realized that he had not yet reached the surface, although he knew he was very close.

His eyes narrowed as he considered the situation. He couldn't use the stairs since they were flooded with gas. And at any minute he might see the deadly, white tendrils of the gas issuing from the vents. There was only one thing to do.

Sighing, Pell aimed the blaster at the ceiling and depressed the stud. The innocuous-looking blue finger took huge bites from the heavily reinforced cement and it cascaded down to the floor of the corridor before him.

Ignoring its burning heat, Pell leaped for a drooping girder and hauled himself painfully through the ragged hole to the corridor above.

Frozen with surprise, several DIC mercenaries watched a haggard, blackened

figure materialize suddenly from the midst of a gaping hole in the floor. One or two fired wildly at Pell, but the majority fled with terror up a low ramp nearby and through an exit at the top. Pell ran after them, noting with relief that the soldiers wore no gas masks.

The ramp continued its sharp upward rise on the other side of the exit. As he panted up its steep ascent, Pell felt the breath of cool air touch his face; with it the sound of firing increased. Evidently Dallard was attempting to storm the fortress. Breathlessly he hammered up the slope on the heels of the fleeing men and ducked instinctively as several shots were fired at him. He was out on open ground. Swiftly he ran for the cover of a clump of bushes and dived into their concealment.

CENTAURA'S lone satellite shed a strong light over the surrounding ground and Pell was able to make out the dim figures of men around the blaster tower. To his right the tower itself rose sharply into the sky, the vicious helix of the blaster being etched by the moonlight into a clearly defined blackness in the midst of the lesser blackness of the star-studded sky.

To Pell's left the sound of firing was intense, the sharp, hacking bark of machine-guns dominating the chorus. But ragged firing seemed to be present everywhere, apparently indicating that Dallard's Insurgents had attacked the fortress from all sides. The mercenaries seemed to be firmly entrenched, but not so firmly that a little diversion from the rear could not root them out, Pell thought, smiling mirthlessly. Gripping the blaster tightly, Pell peered into the darkness to locate a juicy target.

Beyond the clump of trees in which he was concealed there was a rise in the rocky ground and silhouetted against the sky was a group of men crouching around a machine-gun and firing it down the path up which Heintz, Gret and himself had been brought. He had no doubts that discovery would be only a matter of moments—no doubt word was already being circulated about the madman with a blaster.

Grimly he brought the blaster to his

shoulder and depressed the firing stud. Instantly great gouts of dirt began a short-lived trip into the night sky, including the machine-gun and its crew. The effect, of his sudden attack was instantaneous and confusing. The startled cries of the mercenaries was like music to Pell's ears. But a more ominous music was the faint, chopping whisper of bullets as they spattered through his clump of trees. Ignoring them, Pell leveled the blaster at every likely place in which the mercenaries might be entrenched.

Hell, in the form of violently reacting stones and rocks erupted into the sky, showering the DIC soldiers with molten, lava-like droplets. Seeking protection from the super-heated rain of molten particles, some of the mercenaries panicked and fled to the blast tower that reared bulkily behind them. Their action was like a trigger for others and presently a whole mass of men were fleeing for the protection of the tower. Heartlessly Pell let his ravaging blaster play among the fleeing men. And on their heels came a shouting, triumphant horde of ragged Insurgents bearing antiquated weapons.

Some of them dropped, but most streamed after the terrified mercenaries into the fortress. Although they did not know whom to credit for the unexpected aid, they knew it was from a friend. Pell, infected with the wild excitement of the Insurgents, threw caution to the winds and left his hiding place to storm the warrens with them.

Somewhere in that mass of cement and steel were Raul Gutridge and Gret Hel-muth. For the Insurgents it was complete and utter triumph, but for Pell it was a hollow victory unless he could find Gret alive and Gutridge dead. His jaw was out-thrust with determination as he entered the fortress with the Insurgents. The DIC had beaten him before, crushing him out of business. But this time he was fighting with their methods and he was determined to win.

As he shoved through the press of Insurgents down the ramp up which he had come a short time before, the revolutionaries looked at him askance and fingered their weapons uneasily. They muttered among themselves and one of them turned to Pell.

"Who are you and where did you get that thing?" the man asked, indicating Pell's blaster.

"I'm with you," replied Pell to the first question. "Where's Dallard?" he asked, ignoring the second.

"Right behind you," replied a new voice from his rear.

Pell turned, startled. Behind him stood a slight man with the bearing of an officer. But his cold blue eyes and the large ancient revolver he pointed at Pell hardly betokened friendship.

"Who are you?" Dallard asked.

Briefly Pell explained, indicating his desire to find Gret and Gutridge. When he had finished, Dallard whistled softly and looked at Pell with new respect.

"We'll give you all the help we can, Pell—and in case we run into some tough opposition, we'd like you to reciprocate—with that thing." Dallard grinned and as he walked away with his men, called over his shoulder, "Luck!"

Pell nodded absently and turned away, considering the almost hopeless hunt that confronted him. Certainly they were no longer in the blaster tower; obviously Gutridge had taken the girl into the depths of the fortress when the Insurgents had attacked. Then the unpleasant possibility that Gutridge might be holding the girl as a hostage occurred to him. It added new drive to his purpose.

PELL'S ACTIONS that night, had they occurred in another age, would have been the fiber of a legend. He never remembered exactly what he did himself and the accounts of the Insurgents who saw only a part of his exploits were disjointed and inconsistent.

Suffice it to say that a haggard, smoke-blackened, wild man almost single-handedly destroyed the last remnants of the DIC mercenary army on Centauri VI that night. In the face of Pell's blaster they surrendered faster than they could be captured. Points of resistance, when they were touched by the deadly blue finger of the blaster, vanished in violently reacting clouds.

Perhaps the toughest struggle of all was with a group of fanatical mercenaries on the sixth level who were scrabbling desperately in the rubble of the entrance

to the dead-end corridor which led to the atomic armory. Fearing that its violent energies would explode the U-235 in the armory, Pell, was unable to use the blaster against them. Desperately the Insurgents stormed the level, only to be cut down sickeningly by the trapped mercenaries. In the end, however, there could only be one result and the weary DIC soldiers had no choice but to surrender.

Pell's search was ended on the thirty-seventh level. Because of its tremendous depth, this level was ventilated only with great difficulty. The air, what there was of it, was close and sticky. The rumbling whine of the ventilator turbine could be heard plainly as it labored to force air into the dimly-lit, narrow passage-ways. The walls and pillars were huge chunks of almost solid, heavily reinforced cement since they had to support the ponderous weight of three dozen levels and the mighty blaster tower itself.

Uneasily the Insurgents crept into the depths behind Pell and Major Dallard. Pell himself was worried. The entire warren above had been combed unsuccessfully for Gutridge and Gret Helmut. The gnawing fear that had tormented Pell burst out more powerfully. Suppose Gutridge had taken Gret into these depths and was holding her as a hostage? Pell shrugged grimly to himself and strained his eyes to pierce the gloom.

Suddenly the heavy silence that shrouded the place was broken by the crackling of static and the sound of a well-known voice originating from a speaker almost above Pell's head. It was Gutridge!

"I see you've discovered my hiding place, Pell," boomed Gutridge, his voice reverberating in the tomb-like passages.

"I'm entertaining a guest," Gutridge continued. "I believe she is a friend of yours. You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, would you, Pell?" His laughter made the passage vibrate.

"Pell!" thundered the speaker, "I want a guarantee of freedom. In return, I will deliver the girl unharmed. This is a two-way speaker, so you may reply into it."

"How do I know she is alive?" Pell stalled desperately.

"You may speak to her," Gutridge answered. "Say a few words to the gentleman, my dear."

"Pell!" Gret screamed over the speaker, "this whole place is mined. Get out before he kills you all!"

Pell heard distinctly the sound of a meaty fist colliding with flesh and bone, followed by Gutridge's muttering voice, "You talk too much, my dear."

Rage—blind, helpless, unreasoning rage washed over Pell in prickly waves. Then Gutridge spoke again.

"There you have it. I will give you two minutes to decide," the speaker echoed. Its crackling subsided and only the hum of its open circuit could be heard.

Then Pell felt a tapping on his shoulder. He turned and saw Dallard in the dimness.

"Guarantee his freedom, Pell. Offer him a space ship," Dallard whispered. "It's either that or he blows us all up. Personally, I am not particularly in favor of dying—especially with him."

Pell grunted inaudibly and turned to the speaker. "Okay, Gutridge, you win. Send the girl out first, then follow. You will be escorted to the surface and given a ship."

Gutridge chuckled. "If it were anyone but the honorable Fletcher Pell who made that promise, I'd balk. All right, she's coming out."

Straining his eyes in the darkness, Pell presently saw the slight figure of Gret Helmuth approach. When she saw him, she broke into a limping run and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Pell, I never thought I'd see you again," she cried, burying her face in his shoulder.

Pell swore and looked up to see Gutridge loom out of the dark. The big man had a small box in his hand which he waved debonairly at Pell.

"You know, just in case. This little gadget can transmit a radio wave that will touch off the explosives," Gutridge chuckled. "That woman of yours is bad medicine—she scratches like a wild cat."

Pell stifled his rage with difficulty, noting with small satisfaction that his face, too, had sustained no small damage.

"Where's that space ship?" Gutridge asked, now all business.

Pell didn't reply, but gestured for the big man to follow and the party made its way to the surface in an elevator that still functioned.

A BEAUTIFUL DAWN was breaking, but it affected Pell not at all. Morosely he stared through the plastine window of his cramped quarters in the blaster tower.

Through the window he could make out the busy activities of the Insurgents. Gingly they had cleared away the rubble of the demolished entrance to the armory and were now engaged in carrying the vaults of U-235 out of the fortress.

As he watched them absently, the door opened behind him and Gret entered, her brown gold hair gleaming intoxicatingly in the early light. Even her rough jumper couldn't hide the fresh young curves of her body.

"What's the matter, Grouchy?" she teased. "Still worrying about Gutridge escaping?"

"Yeah," Pell growled. "As long as he's alive, the game isn't finished. But—" he smiled—"I've got you. That ought to be enough for any perfectionist."

He was about to kiss her when the door opened again and Dallard entered.

He looked from Pell to Gret and raised his eyebrows. "I trust I wasn't interrupting anything," he drawled slyly.

"Oh, come in, Dallard," Pell said, although not very enthusiastically. "How are your men coming along with the uranium?"

"Fine. Fine. But, I say, you're hardly the bright and cheery fellow one would expect to meet this morning."

"He's worried about Gutridge escaping," Gret explained.

Dallard laughed, "Pell, haven't you heard about his . . . ah . . . little accident? It seems someone forgot to inform the planet-mounteds that our friend would be departing, so I'm afraid he's little more than a cinder now. Frightful mistake, eh?"

He clucked innocently and, twirling his sandy mustache airily, walked jauntily from the room.

Pell looked after him amazed, a small shudder running the length of his spine. "You colonials are forgetful people, aren't you?" he observed.

"Perhaps," Gret replied, wrinkling her nose at him, "but sometimes it pays."

"Well, in the future," Pell said, "don't forget I like my ham and eggs in bed."



Every time he tore loose they brought him down again.

THE THIRD LITTLE GREEN MAN

By DAMON KNIGHT

He was unnecessary. The first two had already convinced Shoemaker there was only one cure for his condition—and that was to get the hell away from space-ships and onto a nice red wagon.

SHOEMAKER SAT IN THE OPEN sallyport of the ship and looked gloomily at a pale blue-green seascape, parted down the middle by a ghostly shoreline. The sea was a little greener, and the land was a little bluer; otherwise there was no difference to the eye. Once in a while a tiny breeze came in from the sea, and then the stink changed from sulphur to fish.

Venus, he decided, was a pest-hole. If he'd known it would be like this, he would have socked old Davies in the eye when he came to him with his damned plans.

And then he'd have got roaring drunk to celebrate his escape.

Drunk. . . Boy, he'd been squiffed last night! And every night, except one horrible period when they'd found his cache and it had been three days before he could shut off the engines and make more. Thinking of that, he shuddered. Better get started early tonight; no telling when the others would be back.

He rose and went back into the stifling heat of the ship. No cooling system in the thing; that's one item he hadn't thought of. But then, to hear Davies and Burford talk,

Venus was going to be a kind of Turkish paradise, full of pomegranates and loose women. Nothing had been said about the temperature or the smells.

He walked down the narrow passageway to the hold, entered one of the compartments, and stopped before a patched section of the bulkhead. The ship was practically nothing *but* patches, and this looked no different from the rest. But it was.

Shoemaker stuck a fingernail under the lower end of the metal strip, and pulled. The strip came loose. He got his finger all the way under and lifted. The soldered edges tore away like so much glue.

He caught the section as the top came away, and laid it aside. Behind it, in a space where plastic filler had been removed, were stacked bottles of a colorless liquid. He took one of them out and shoved it into his back pocket. Then he picked up the patch sheet and, holding it in place with one hand, took a metal-foil tube out of his pocket with the other. The gunk in the tube was his own discovery; a phony solder fluid that was pretty nearly as strong as the real thing, except that the slightest leverage would pull it loose. He smeared a thin film of the stuff all around the patch, held the sheet for a few seconds more while it dried, then stood off to examine his work. Perfect.

The bottle in his pocket was uncomfortably warm against his thin rump. Well, he could fix that, too. He went down the passage to the next compartment, jockeyed an oxygen tank around until he could get at the petcock, and held the bottle in a thin stream of the compressed gas. In a minute the liquor was chilled.

He was sweating prodigiously. Gasping a little, he went back to the sallyport and sat down. He settled his broad back against the doorway, put the neck of the bottle against his pursed lips, and drank.

He was lowering his head after the fifth long swallow, when he saw something move against the misty boundary of sea and land. He followed it with his eyes. His long "Ahhh" of satisfaction ended in the sound of a man treacherously struck in the belly.

A LITTLE GREEN MAN was standing there, a little poisonous-green man with blue-green whiskers and eyes like

emeralds. He was about fourteen inches high, counting his big rabbit ears. He had an ominous look on his face.

Shoemaker gaped. Suddenly, the things Burford had been telling him, this morning before he and the other two had left to go exploring, began to run through his mind. *Flesh and blood can stand just so much, Jim. One of these days a pink elephant or a polka-dot giraffe is going to step out of a bottle and say to you—*

"Shoemaker, your time has come."

He jumped a foot. He was quivering all over.

Just as Shoemaker was telling himself that it couldn't possibly have happened, the little man moved a step forward and said it again.

Shoemaker dived for the door and slammed it after him. Ten minutes later, when he stopped shaking long enough to open it again, the little green man was gone.

This was not so good, Shoemaker told himself. Whether it was the d. t.'s or just a hallucination brought on by chilled liquor in a hot climate, that green man was nothing he wanted to have around.

He started thinking about what Burford and Davies and Hale would do if they found out he'd started seeing things. They'd taken a lot from him, because he was the only man who could hold the *Space Queen* together; but this might be too much.

For instance, there was his habit of stopping the engines whenever he ran out of liquor. Well, he had an alibi for that, anyway. Two days out of New York, they'd found his supply of Scotch and dumped it into space. Fighting mad, he'd waited until the others were asleep, then disconnected the transmutator that fed the rocket motors and adjusted it to turn out pure grain alcohol. With the addition of a little grapefruit juice from the stores, it made a fair-to-middling tippie. He'd kept going on it ever since.

But, if there were green men in it. . .

Shuddering, he went outside to wait for Davies and the other two. It was a little cooler now, with the sun clear around on the other side of the planet, but it was also a lot darker. Shoemaker turned on the light in the sallyport and stood under it, nervously peering into the blackness.

PRESENTLY he heard a hail, and then saw the three lights coming toward him. Three of them; that meant nobody had been devoured by saber-toothed pipicacas, or whatever cockeyed carnivores there were on this Turkish bath of a world. That was good. If anybody killed any of them—big, slow-thinking Davies, the chubby, drawing Hale—or Burford in particular—Shoemaker wanted it to be him.

That was Burford now. "Seen any elephants?"

Damn him. There went Shoemaker's idea of asking casually if they'd seen any little green creatures around. Burford was feeling sharp tonight, and he'd pounce on that like a cat.

The three slogged into the circle of light. They looked a little tired, even the whipcord-lean Burford. Their boots were crusted with blue-gray mud almost to the knees.

"Have any trouble finding your way back?" Shoemaker asked. Davies shook his big head slowly. He looked a little surprised. "No . . . No, there's a river up yonder about a mile, you know. We saw it when we landed. . . ."

"Jim was out cold at the time," Burford put in. He grinned nastily at Shoemaker.

"So we just followed it up a ways and then back," Davies finished, putting his knapsack down on the galley table. He sat down heavily. "We didn't see a thing . . . not a thing. Looks like we'll have to pick up the ship and use it to cruise around . . . but we can't spare much fuel, you know." He looked reproachfully at Shoemaker. "We used up so much correcting course every time you shut off the engines. . . ."

Shoemaker felt himself getting hot. "Well, if you three commissars hadn't heaved out my Scotch—"

"Okay, okay, break it up," said Hale boredly. He let his soft bulk down into a chair. Burford stood up, leaning against the bulkhead.

"You hear anything on the radio, Shoemaker?" Hale asked.

Shoemaker shook his head. "Had it on all day," he said. "Not a peep."

"I don't get it," Burford said. "Radio signals started practically as soon as we hit

atmosphere. They wavered, but we traced them down right about here. Then, as soon as we landed, they quit. There's something funny about that."

"Well, now," said Davies, wagging his head, "I wouldn't exactly say it was *funny*, Charley. . . . Now you take us, there might be any number of reasons why we'd quit signaling, if it was the Venusians landing on Earth instead of us the other way around. . . ." He sighed. "But it comes to this, boys. If there are any animals on Venus, intelligent or otherwise, it makes no never-mind, we've got to find 'em. We got to have *some* kind o' specimens to take back, or we're sunk. You remember how much trouble we had, just getting the Supreme Council to subsidize us at all. . . ."

Shoemaker remembered, Davies' math was all right; it was the only language he really knew his way around in. And he had the fuel, and the motor. All he needed was money to build a ship. But he'd picked the wrong time for it.

It had been just five years after the end of World War III when Davies had started making plans for his ship. The World Federation was only four and a half years old, and still bogged down in a quagmire of difficulties. What with two Balkan and three Indian principalities still "unreconstructed," ousted officials of other retarded nations raising hell with underground movements, the world re-arming for still another war—plus a smashed, half-starving empire, smouldering with atomic fire, to deal with—the Supreme Council had little time or money to give to space flight.

Davies, though, had had his first and only non-mathematical idea, and it was a good one. This is the way it added up. The World Federation argued, reasonably, that the only way to police the world effectively against the possibility of another war was for everybody to come into the W. F. But the hold-out nations in Europe and America, who had been neutral during the last conflict—and were powerful out of all proportion simply because they had—plus the millions of emigres who had set up shop in South America and Africa, replied that the W. F. wasn't going to police *them*, and that they'd sooner have another war and, furthermore, that if the

W. F. thought it could win it, let them go ahead and drop the first bomb.

The result was an impasse that was throwing the World's Cultural Rehabilitation Program all out of kilter. Well, said Davies, suppose it were possible to prove to the reactionary nations that Venus was habitable—wouldn't they jump at the chance to avoid World War IV by moving out entirely? Then the W. F. would be able to go about its business, organizing the Earth into One World—until it was so strong that the Venus colony would be a pushover, and serve them right.

Meanwhile, what if there were intelligent life on Venus—intelligent enough to be a new source of cheap labor, now that every world citizen was demanding that his working day be cut immediately to five hours?

The bored Bureau Chief to whom Davies had talked had nodded thoughtfully and said there might be something in it, and a few months later Davies had been set up as head of a new Department, with a wholly inadequate appropriation.

Burford and Hale had been assigned to the project by the North American Labor Bureau, and Shoemaker, appealed to by Davies, had joined up principally because it was a tough job. Then they'd gone to work, spending the money in dribblets as they got it. They'd had to revise the specifications downward half a dozen times, and when they were through, the *Space Queen* was a rule-of-thumb monstrosity that only a mechanical genius could hold together. Shoemaker was the genius.

HE THOUGHT about the time the meteor had hulled them, piercing both shop walls and banging hell out of the compartment across the corridor. Shoemaker had been in the shop, so drunk he could hardly stand up; but he'd held his breath long enough to slap a patch over the hole through which all the air in that section had gone whistling out, and seal it tight. Then he'd staggered to an oxygen flask, turned it on full and got enough air in his lungs to keep from passing out. By the time the others rolled out of bed and came down to see whether he was alive or dead, pressure was back to normal.

He remembered Hale's white face poked through the open seal-door in the

corridor. "What happened, for Pete's sake?"

"Termites," Shoemaker had said.

What a trip, ye gods, what a trip. He'd done some cockeyed things in his life, but this junket a million miles from anywhere took the oscar. And now, if he was going to have the screaming meemies, he wanted to have them in a nice comfortable hospital—not in this watered-down version of a surrealist's nightmare.

Burford was saying something to him. Shoemaker roused himself. "What?"

"I said, what's with you, Edison? You've been sitting there with a dopey look on your face for half an hour. You haven't heard a word we've been saying, have you?"

Shoemaker made a quick recovery. "I was thinking, bird-brain. That's a little pastime us intellectuals indulge in. I'd teach it to you, but I don't think you'd like it."

Burford looked at him sharply. Shoemaker began to sweat. Was it showing on him already?

Burford said casually, "No offense. Well, think I'll turn in. Big day tomorrow." He strolled out, closing the door behind him.

Shoemaker got up to go a few minutes later, but Davies said, "Say, Jim, there was something I wanted to ask you. I know. Now just what was it? Wait a minute, it'll come back to me. Oh, yes, Jim, do you think—now, you understand, I just want a rough guess on this—do you reckon if we were to use up all the mercury we got, we could scout around and get us some of this sand, or maybe some ore from lower down—"

When he finally got it out, it appeared that he wanted to know if Shoemaker thought they'd be able to refine some local mineral enough to put it through the transmutor without blowing themselves up.

Exasperated, Shoemaker said, "Sure, easy. It would only take us five or six years to dig up the stuff, build a refinery, get hold of a couple of tons of reagents from Lord knows where, and adjust the trans-M to take the final product. Just a nice little rest-cure, and then we can all go home to glory and show off our long gray beards."

That started the old argument all over again. Davies said, "Now, Jim, don't excite yourself. Don't you see the thing is, if we go home with nothing but some mud and moss that we could have picked up anywhere, or some pictures that we could have faked, why, the Supreme Council will want to know what they spent all that money for. You know we'll get disciplined, sure as—"

Shoemaker's nerves got jumpier by the minute. Finally he said, "Oh, blow it out a porthole!" and slammed the galley door behind him.

He met Burford down the corridor, just turning in to his cubby.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Where do you think?" Burford said rudely.

Shoemaker was half undressed when a horrible thought struck him. In his stocking feet, he hurried up to the compartment where his liquor was hidden. The patch was lying propped against the bulkhead; the concealed space was empty. A crowbar lay on the deck, fragments of real solder from other patches clinging to its edge.

Burning, he went back to the engine-room.

Burford had been thorough. The micro-spectrograph had been carefully pried off and disconnected from the rest of the transmutation rig. Without it, the setup was useless for either the designer's purpose—making fissionable plutonium—or Shoemaker's—the manufacture of 200-proof happy water.

Shoemaker didn't have to look to know that the spares were gone, too.

Luckily, he had about five quarts of the stuff hidden for emergencies in a canister marked "Hydrochloric Acid" down in the shop. With rationing, it would do. It would have to. Green men or no, he couldn't go dry. He'd been a quart-a-day man for as long as he could remember, and it would take more than a spook or two to scare him off it.

HE HAD to admit to a certain apprehension, though, as he sat on watch in the sallyport the next evening. Land, sea and sky were the same slimy monotone; the occasional breath of wind that came in from the ocean bore the same broad hint of decaying marine life. It had

been just about this time last night when that—

Restless, he got up and tramped around the ship. On the seaward side, beyond the huge muzzles of the rocket tubes, the greenish sand sloped downward abruptly in a six-foot embankment to the stagnant edge of the water. There was nothing out there, not even a ripple.

To landward, there was nothing but mud.

He sat down again, looked dubiously at his half-finished quart, decided to let it rest awhile. The glass had a green tinge from the sand around it. Resolutely, he turned his mind to the exploring party, tramping around in that godforsaken wilderness again. Well, what do you think, Shoemaker? he asked himself. How long will it take those supermen to give up their little paper-chase? Two more days? Three? A week? Shoemaker, he answered, I don't know and at this point I don't give a damn. I got more important things to worry about.

That seemed to settle that. He stared gloomily at the bottle, then picked it up and drank.

When he lowered the bottle again, pushing the cap shut with his thumb, the little green man was there.

No, it was a different one this time. Rigid with shock, he could still see that this one was fatter around the middle and had shorter whiskers.

But the expression was the same. Like a fiend on his way to a dismemberment party.

He found his voice. "Where did you come from?"

The little man smiled unpleasantly. "Mud and moss," he said.

Shoemaker wanted to yell. Holding a conversation with a hunk of mist, a non-existent goblin! He hardly recognized his own voice when he said, "What do you want?"

The green man walked toward him. "Heaved out my Scotch," he said, and leered.

Shoemaker did yell. Leaping to his feet, flinging his arms wide, he bellowed like a wounded carabao. The bottle slipped out of his fingers and looped gracefully into the sea. The goblin turned his head to follow it.

Then, astonishingly, he looked at Shoemaker, said, "It'll come back," and dived in after the bottle.

Neither of them came up, though Shoemaker hung onto the frame of the sallyport and watched for half an hour.

SHOEMAKER heard their voices through the hull when they came back that night.

"Where's the old soak?" That was Burford.

"Now, Charley, that isn't nice. He didn't say anything, but you could tell he wasn't feeling so good when he found out you'd located his cache. I dunno's we should of done that. He's sure to get real uncooperative on us, and we need him."

"All right!" said Burford. "But have you noticed how shaky he's been the last couple of days? What if he cracks up, then where'll we be? I say it isn't enough to just throw out his liquor—he'll make more as soon as we get into space again. We ought to make him take the cure. Force it down his throat if we have to."

"Sure," said Hale. "Just tell him we're through kidding around. He's got to take it and like it."

"Now, boys, take it easy," Davies said. "We've been all over this before. . . ."

Shoemaker grinned sourly. So that was what they were cooking up. Well, forewarned was forearmed; as a matter of fact, he'd given this possibility some thought a long time ago, and acted accordingly. So he had one hole card, anyway. But getting them to agree to an immediate takeoff was another horse.

Wait a minute . . . There was an idea. If he played it right—it was tricky, but it might work.

They were coming in the sallyport now. Shoemaker ducked down to the chem store-room, found the bottle he was looking for and filled a small capsule from it. His hands were shaking, he noticed. That was what the fear of hellfire did to you.

Shoemaker had reached a decision. Delirium tremens wasn't a good enough answer; it didn't fit. If he thought it was that, he'd gladly take the cure, even though the idea made his belly crawl. Of course, it was too late for that, anyway—he'd thrown out the drug in Burford's sick-box and substituted plain baking soda long ago.

But Shoemaker thought he knew what was happening to him, and it wasn't d. t.'s. It wasn't the usual dipso's collection of crazy daymares at all; there was a horrid kind of logic to it. Instead of delirium, it was—judgment.

That was as far as he'd gone. He knew he had it coming to him, and now he thought he was going to get it. But he hadn't given up yet. There was one thing he could still do, and that was to run—get clear away from this damned planet. After that, he'd just have to take his chances. Maybe the things could follow him into space, maybe not. Shoemaker wasn't sure of anything any more.

He slipped the capsule into his pocket where he could get at it when he needed it, and went on up the passageway.

"Oh, there you are," said Burford. "We were wondering where you'd got to."

Shoemaker glared at him. "Okay, go ahead, ask me if I was digging for a microspectrograph mine."

Burford looked shocked. "Why, Jim, you know I wouldn't say a nasty thing like that." He took Shoemaker's arm. "Come on up to the galley. We're having a pow-wow."

Oh-oh, thought Shoemaker. This looks like it. He put his hand in his pocket and folded his handkerchief over the capsule.

Davies and Hale stared at him solemnly as he came through the door with Burford behind him. He looked back at them, poker-faced, and sat down.

Davies cleared his throat. "Er-um, Jim, we've been worried about you lately. You don't act like you're feeling too chipper."

"That's right," said Shoemaker, looking doleful. "I've been thinking about my poor old mother."

Burford snorted. "Your poor old mother died fifty years ago."

"She did," said Shoemaker, taking out his handkerchief, "and she died with one great wish unfulfilled."

"Yeah? What was that?" Burford asked skeptically.

"She always wanted to have a son like you," Shoemaker said, "so that she could whale the living daylight out of him." He blew his nose raucously, slipped the capsule into his mouth, put his handkerchief away and smiled beatifically.

Davies was frowning. "Jim," he said,

"I wish you wouldn't make jokes about it. We all know what's the matter with you. You been fightin' the liquor too hard."

"Who says so?" Shoemaker demanded.

"Now, Jim, don't make things difficult. I don't like this any more'n you do, but—"

"Like what?"

Burford made an impatient gesture. "Go ahead, tell him, Lou. No use dragging it out."

"That's right," Hale put in, glowering.

"Shut up, you," said Shoemaker. He turned to Davies. "Tell me what? You're not going to bring up that 'cure' chestnut again, by any chance?"

Davies looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, Jim. I know you don't want to take it. I argued against it, but the boys finally convinced me. You know, Jim, if it was only you that we had to think about, I wouldn't try to make you do anything you didn't want to. But, don't you see, this is it—either we all stick together or we're sunk. If we don't all keep in good shape and able to do our jobs, why . . . well, you see, don't you, Jim—"

"What he means," said Burford, "is that this time you're going to take the cure, whether you want to or not."

Shoemaker got up and put his chair very carefully out of the way.

"Let's see you make me," he said.

IT HAD to look good, so when Burford grabbed for him he stepped back and swung a hearty right into the middle of Burford's face.

Burford staggered, but kept on coming. He clipped Shoemaker's jaw glancingly, swung again and missed, then gave him a beauty in the eye.

Shoemaker aimed for the midriff and got it. "Uff!" said Burford. Then Hale tackled him from behind and the three of them were all over him.

Shoemaker writhed, kicking, biting and using his elbows, but every time he tore loose they brought him down again. After a while he was beginning to wonder if he could get away even if he really meant it. Then, somehow, Davies got a half Nelson on him and bore down. Shoemaker decided it was time to quit.

He looked at his opponents. Burford had a black eye and several assorted con-

tusions, Hale a puffed and bleeding cheek. He couldn't see Dave's face, but the pants-leg stretched out beside his own was ripped and hanging down over the boot, revealing a hairy thigh. Shoemaker felt pretty good.

"Whuff," said Burford, gazing at him with a new respect. He got up carefully, walked over to the sick-box and came back with a box of powders and a glass of water.

He knelt. Shoemaker glared at him. Burford said, "Okay, baby, open your mouth or we'll pry it open. Hold his head, Lou." Davies' big hand clasped Shoemaker's skull, and Burford pried at his lower jaw. The instant his lips parted, Burford tilted the powder into his mouth, then pushed it shut again. Shoemaker's eyes bulged. "Swallow," said Burford remorselessly, and grabbed Shoemaker's nose between a horny finger and thumb.

Shoemaker swallowed. "Now you get the water," Burford said, and held the glass to his lips. Shoemaker drank, meekly.

Burford stood up. "Well," he said uncertainly, "that's that." Davies let go of Shoemaker and eased out from under him. Then he stood beside Burford and Hale, and all three looked down at Shoemaker.

There were real tears in Shoemaker's eyes—from having his nose pinched in Burford's vise-like grip—and his face looked drawn. Slowly, like an old man, he got to his feet, walked to the table and sat down.

"Now, Jim," Davies began hesitantly, "don't take on. It isn't so bad. You'll be a better man for it, you know. You'll prob'ly gain weight and everything. Now, Jim—"

Shoemaker wasn't listening. His eyes were rigid and glassy, his jaw lax. Slowly he began to tremble. He slumped over and hit the deck with a thud, still jerking.

"Good Lord!" exploded Burford.

"What is it?" Hale demanded.

"Mitchel's reaction," said Burford. "Hasn't happened twice in thirty years. I never thought—"

"Is it dangerous, Charley?"

"Lord, yes. Wait till I get the hand-book." Shoemaker heard his quick steps, then pages being riffled.

When he thought it was safe, Shoemaker sneaked a look out of one eye. The other two men were pressed close to Burford,

staring over his shoulders. Their backs were to him, but he kept jerking his body occasionally anyway, just to be on the safe side.

"Treatment," said Burford hoarsely, "extended rest on soft diet, diathermy, u. v. irradiation, hourly injection of—Hell, we can't do that. We haven't got half the stuff."

"What happens if he don't get it, Charley?" said Davies nervously. "I mean to say, how long—"

Burford flipped pages. "General debility, progressing rapidly, followed by heart stoppage and death after four to ten weeks."

"Oh, my," said Davies. "What'll we do, Charley? I mean—"

"Wait a minute, here. Are you sure he's got what you think?" asked Hale skeptically. "How do you know he's not faking?"

"Faking!" said Burford. "Well—he's got all the symptoms." He riffled pages. "Immediate unconsciousness, violent tremors—oh-oh. Look at this."

The two heads craned forward eagerly. There was a moment of silence, and then Hale giggled. "Well, if he does *that*, I'll believe you!"

"Yes," said Davies seriously, "but, if he's unconscious, how can he—"

Burford glanced at the handbook again. "He should be coming to any time now," he said loudly. "When he does, we'll know for sure."

SHOEMAKER grinned to himself. He knew that section of the Medical Handbook by heart. *Patient remains unconscious and cannot be roused for twenty minutes to one-half hour. . . .* He kept his eyes closed and waited, jerking occasionally, for what he judged was a good twenty minutes, then another five for good measure. When he opened them again, he saw Davies' anxious face a few inches away, flanked by Burford's and Hale's.

"He's coming out of it!" said Burford. "How do you feel, old man?"

"Wha—?" said Shoemaker.

"You've had a little stroke," said Burford mendaciously. "Help me get him up . . . You'll be all right, Jim, but you've got to do just as we tell you."

"Poisoned me," Shoemaker gasped, suffering himself to be hoisted limply erect.

"No, no," Davies protested. "We're trying to help you, Jimmy boy. Just go with Charley, that's right. Here, take this bottle, Charley."

Even Shoemaker was a little startled by what followed.

When they returned, Burford nodded solemnly. "It was blue, all right," he said.

"Poisoned me!" said Shoemaker, allowing himself to speak a little more emphatically.

"Oh, hell!" said Burford, lifting Shoemaker's quaking body into a chair. "So we poisoned you. We didn't mean to do it. Question is now, what's to be done?"

"Why, we've got to get him to a hospital," said Davies. "Got to start back to Earth immediately. Uh—but, Charley, will he be well enough to work on the trip?"

"It *might* not kill him," said Burford grimly. "But what about us? Are we going to go back empty-handed?"

"Oh, my," said Davies. "I forgot for a minute. No, we *can't* do that. But look here, Charley—if he dies while we're still here, how're we going to get back without him?"

"We'll have to, that's all," said Burford.

"Check," said Hale.

"Well, I got to admit you boys are right," said Davies promptly, with a long face. "Never had to make a more difficult decision in my life. Poor old Jim! When I think—"

He stopped with a gasp as Shoemaker rose to his feet, swelling visibly with rage. "When I think," said Shoemaker loudly, "of the chances I've had—" he found himself encumbered by the broken halves of the capsule under his tongue, and spat them out violently—"to strangle the whole murdering crew of you quietly in your sleep—" His fingers curled. He started toward Davies slowly, on stiff legs.

Burford was staring at the capsule-halves on the deck. Suddenly he bent and picked them up, saw the faint blue stain that still clung to their edges. Light broke over his face. "Methylene blue!" he said. "You knew—you hid this in your mouth and swallowed it. Why, you old—"

"I did," said Shoemaker, "and now I'm going to make *you* swallow it." He stepped

forward and swung a vigorous right that knocked Burford through the open door.

Hale had picked up a chair. Shoemaker ducked aside as it whooshed down, meanwhile kicking Hale in the stomach. Then he looked around for Davies, but the latter, it seemed, was behind him. Something tapped Shoemaker on the back of the skull, and then everything faded away in gray mist. . . .

THE MIST lifted once, while, with a throbbing head, he listened to Burford explaining that everything on the ship that could possibly be a weapon was locked up; that if he attempted any more reactionary violence they would as soon leave him dead on Venus as not; and that if he knew what was good for him, he would behave himself both before the takeoff—which would occur when they pleased—and after it.

He tried to tell Burford what he could do with himself, but he fell asleep again before he was half through.

When he woke, finally, it was evening, and low voices from the galley forward told him that the other three had returned from another day of hunting. He got up, feeling stiff and heavy, and prowled disconsolately down the passageway as far as his shop door, which was, indeed, locked. He was hungry, but he had a feeling that the sight of any one of the other three human faces on Venus would take away his appetite. For lack of anything better to do, he stepped into the airlock, closed the inner door quietly behind him, and sat down morosely in the sallyport.

Sky and sea were dull blue-green, without star or horizon. There was a stink of sulphur, and then a stink of fish, and then another stink of sulphur. . . . He sat and sweated, thinking his gloomy thoughts.

Shoemaker was not a moral man, but the sense of personal doom was strong upon him. Suppose there really were a Hell, he thought, only the preachers were wrong about everything but the heat. . . . A splitting skull . . . No liquor . . . No women . . . A stinking, slime-blue seascape that was the same right-side up, upside-down, or crossways . . . And the little green men. He had almost forgotten them.

When he looked up, he remembered.

The third little man was slimmer, and had no whiskers at all. He carried a shiny golden dagger, almost as big as himself. He was walking forward purposefully.

Shoemaker waited, paralyzed.

The little man fixed him with his gleaming eye. "We're through kidding around," he said grimly. "Question is now!"

And he laid the golden dagger in Shoemaker's quaking palm.

Shoemaker's first impulse was to cut his own throat. His second was to throw the dagger as far away as possible. Those two came in flashing tenths of a second. The third was stronger. He rose effortlessly into the air, landed facing the sallyport, and, mouth wide open but emitting no sound, ran straight through it. He passed the closed inner door more by a process of ignoring it than by bursting it open.

Directly opposite was the door of Burford's chubby, just now open far enough to show Burford's startled face. When he saw Shoemaker, he tried hastily to shut the door, but Shoemaker by now had so much momentum as to have reached, for practical purposes, the status of an irresistible force. In the next second, he came to a full stop; but this was only because he was jammed against Burford, who was jammed against the far wall of the room, which was braced by five hundred tons of metal.

"Ugg," said Burford. "Whuff—where did you get that knife?"

"Shut up and start talking," said Shoemaker wildly. "Where's the microspectrograph?"

Burford opened his mouth to yell. Shoemaker shut it with a fist, meanwhile thrusting the knife firmly against Burford's midriff to illustrate the point.

Burford spat out a tooth. As Shoemaker put a little more pressure on the blade, he said hastily, "It's in the—uhh!—fuel reservoir."

Shoemaker whirled him around and propelled him into the corridor, after a quick look to make sure that the way was clear. They proceeded to the engine room, in this order: Burford, knife, Shoemaker.

Without waiting to be persuaded, Burford produced a ring of keys, unlocked the reservoir, and withdrew the micro-

spectrograph. "Hook it up," said Shoemaker. Burford did so.

"Uhh," said Burford. "Now what—whiskey?"

"Nope," said Shoemaker incautiously. "We're taking off."

Burford's eyes bulged. He made a whooffling noise and then, without warning, lunged forward, grabbing Shoemaker's knife arm with one hand and punching him with the other. They rolled on the deck.

Shoemaker noticed that Burford's mouth was open again, and he put his hand into it, being too busy keeping away from Burford's knee to take more effective measures. Burford bit a chunk out of the hand and shouted, "Hale! Davies! Help!"

THERE were bangings in the corridor. Shoemaker decided the knife was more of a hindrance than a help, and dropped it. When Burford let go to reach for it, he managed to roll them both away, at the same time getting a good two-handed grip on Burford's skinny throat. This maneuver had the disadvantage of putting Burford on top, but Shoemaker solved the problem by lifting him bodily and banging his skull against the nearby bulkhead.

Burford sagged. Shoemaker pushed him out of the way and got up, just in time to be knocked down hard by Hale's chunky body.

"Old idiot," panted Hale, "oof! Help me, Davies!"

Shoemaker got an ear between his teeth, and was rewarded by a bloodcurdling scream from Hale. Davies was hopping ponderously around in the background, saying, "Boys, stop it! Oh, my—the guns are all locked up. Charley, give me the keys!"

Shoemaker pulled himself loose from Hale, sprang up, and was immediately pulled down again. Burford, who was getting dizzy to his feet, tipped over Shoemaker's head and added himself to the tangle. Shoemaker got a scissors on him and then devoted himself to the twin problems of avoiding Burford's wildly thrashing heels and keeping Hale away from his throat. Suddenly inspired, he solved both by bending Burford's body upward so that

the latter's booted feet, on their next swing, struck Hale squarely in the middle of his fat face.

At this point he noticed that Davies was standing nearby with one foot raised. He grasped the foot and pushed. Davies hit the deck with a satisfying clang.

Shoemaker got up for the third time and looked around for the dagger, but it had been kicked out of sight. He paused, wondering whom to hit next, and in the interval all three of his opponents scrambled up and came at him.

Shoemaker thought, this is it. He spat on his fist for luck and hit Burford a beauty on the chin. Burford fell down, and, astonishingly, got up again. A little disheartened, Shoemaker took two blows in the face from Hale before he knocked the little man into a far corner. Hale got up again. Shoemaker, who had been aware for some time that someone was pummeling his back, turned around unhappily and knocked Davies down. Davies, at any rate, stayed down.

Burford, whose face was puffy, and Hale, who was bleeding from assorted cuts, came toward him. Hale, he saw, had the dagger in his hand. Shoemaker stepped back, picked up the unconscious Davies by collar and belt, and slung him across the deck. This time both men went down (Hale with a soggy *bloom*), and stayed there. The dagger skidded out of Hale's hand and came to rest at Shoemaker's feet.

He picked it up, knelt at a convenient distance to cut off Hale's and Burford's noses, and threatened to do just that. Burford intimated that he would do as he was told. Hale said nothing, but the expression on his face was enough.

Satisfied, Shoemaker opened a locker with Burford's keys, got a coil of insulated wire and tied up Davies and Hale, after which, with Burford's help, he strapped them into their acceleration hammocks.

Burford was acting a little vague. Shoemaker slapped him around until he looked alive, then set him to punching calculator keys. After a few minutes of this, Burford looked as if he wanted to say something.

"Well, spit it out," said Shoemaker, waving the golden knife.

"You'll get yours," said Burford, looking scared but stubborn. "When we get back to New York—"

"South Africa," corrected Shoemaker, "where the Supreme Council can't ask us any questions."

Burford looked surprised, then said it was a good idea.

It was, too.

THE lone star winked out in the blue-green heavens, and the winds of its passing died away. The throng of little rabbit-eared green men, floating on their placid ocean, gazed after it long after it had disappeared.

"What do you think?" said the slim one without whiskers. "Did they like us?"

The one addressed was yards away, but his long ears heard the question plainly. "Can't say," he answered. "They acted so funny. When we spoke to that one in their

own language, so as to make him feel at home—"

"Yes," said a third, almost invisible in the mist. "Was that the right thing to do, d'you suppose? Are you *sure* you got the words right, that last time?"

"Sure," said the first, confidently. "I was right next to the ship all evening, and I memorized everything they said . . ."

They considered that for a while, sipping from their flasks. Other voices piped up: "Maybe we should have talked to them when they were all together?"

"Nooo. They were so *big*. That one was much the nicest, anyway."

"He took our present."

"Yes," said the slim one, summing it up. "They must have liked us all right. After all, they gave us *this*—swinging his flask to make a pleasant gurgle of 150-proof grain alcohol. "That proves it!"

Burp!

PS's Feature Flash

In the Winter, 1944, Issue of PLANET STORIES there appeared a story, entitled "Doorway to Kjal-Mar", written by one Stuart Fleming. Excited by its brilliance, the successive editors of PLANET—and they *have* been successive—made a great search for the author. It went on for years, this search, until we gradually realized there was no such person as Stuart Fleming. Then we began looking for Damon Knight. To our amazement, we found him—and he agreed to write "The Third Little Green Man"—a story which we felt should appear about this time and indeed do publish in this issue. But still the question remains—

Who is Damon Knight? Thousands of people are asking this question, and getting no answers. Now, for the first time, PS brings you an exclusive, uncensored interview with Knight the Man.

"I get most of my ideas in an abandoned Turkish bath in Brooklyn," said Knight, flicking the ash from his cigar carelessly into his gray Persian. "I believe nothing so resembles the fissionating chamber of a space ship as the awful emptiness of the steam room in this establishment—so dark, so full of nozzles . . ." He waved an expressive hand. "Furthermore, I happen to know the place is haunted—by me."

Knight was born, twenty-four years ago, in a hovel on the outskirts of Hill City, Kansas. He does not remember his mother, except when he needs money. In a long and crowded career, he has been stevedore, gold miner, undertaker, lightning-rod inspector, department store executive, sniper, shoe salesman, zoo inmate, confidential secretary, coke sacker, rat farmer and deep-sea diver—but he has never been a writer.

"I happen to own fifty million monkeys," he explains casually.

Asked to interpret the condition of the stock

market or answer three personal questions, Knight replies without having to take time to think. "Those privileged to listen to him hang on every word, for every one is an original contribution to the English language. He is spoken of admiringly by English professors as the possessor of the largest Urdu vocabulary in America."

He tells his friends, "Never get disheartened when things seem to be against you. In actuality, they are."

Knight lives simply, with his child and three wives, in a tiny corner of Gimbel's sub-basement. Here he writes his famous monographs on various aspects of cacography, enlarges his collection of sock-stretchers, smokes corn-silk cigarettes, and signs his name to such masterpieces of science-fiction as this issue's *Mystery of the Blue Glue*. About this story, Knight says, "About this story I can say nothing."

To editors he is coldly polite; to bill collectors, effusive; to his wives, nauseating. Raconteur, man-about-town, *idiot savant*, he is indeed worthy of his place in science-fiction's Hall of Celebrities. And so we say, Good luck to you, Damon Knight! Drop dead!

—DAMON KNIGHT





Illustrated by Donel

PILLAR OF FIRE

By RAY BRADBURY

We cannot tell you what kind of a story this is. We simply cannot present it as we present other stories. It is too tremendous for that. We are very glad—and proud—to share it with you.

HE came out of the earth, hating. Hate was his father; hate was his mother.

It was good to walk again. It was good to leap up out of the earth, off of your back, and stretch your cramped arms violently and try to take a deep breath!

He *tried*. He cried out.

He couldn't breathe. He flung his arms over his face and tried to breathe. It was impossible. He walked on the earth, he came out of the earth. But he was dead. He couldn't breathe. He could take air into his mouth and force it half down his throat, with withered moves of long-dormant muscles, wildly, wildly! And with

this little air he could shout and cry! He wanted to have tears, but he couldn't make them come, either. All he knew was that he was standing upright, he was dead, he shouldn't be walking! He couldn't breathe and yet he stood.

The smells of the world were all about him. Frustratedly, he tried to smell the smells of autumn. Autumn was burning the land down into ruin. All across the country the ruins of summer lay; vast forests bloomed with flame, tumbled down timber on empty, unleaved timber. The smoke of the burning was rich, blue, and invisible.

He stood in the graveyard, hating. He walked through the world and yet could not taste nor smell of it. He heard, yes. The wind roared on his newly opened ears. But he was dead. Even though he walked he knew he was dead and should expect not too much of himself or this hateful living world.

He touched the tombstone over his own empty grave. He knew his own name again. It was a good job of carving.

WILLIAM LANTRY

That's what the grave stone said.

His fingers trembled on the cool stone surface.

BORN 1898—DIED 1933

Born again . . . ?

What year? He glared at the sky and the midnight autumnal stars moving in slow illuminations across the windy black. He read the tiltings of centuries in those stars. Orion thus and so, Aurega here! and where Taurus? *There!*

His eyes narrowed. His lips spelled out the year:

"2349."

An odd number. Like a school sum. They used to say a man couldn't encompass any number over a hundred. After that it was all so damned abstract there was no use counting. This was the year 2349! A numeral, a sum. And here he was, a man who had lain in his hateful dark coffin, hating to be buried, hating the living people above who lived and lived and lived, hating them for all the centuries, until today, now, born out of hatred, he stood by his own freshly excavated grave,

the smell of raw earth in the air, perhaps, but he could not smell it!

"I," he said, addressing a poplar tree that was shaken by the wind, "am an anachronism." He smiled faintly.

HE LOOKED at the graveyard. It was cold and empty. All of the stones had been ripped up and piled like so many flat bricks, one atop another, in the far corner by the wrought iron fence. This had been going on for two endless weeks. In his deep secret coffin he had heard the heartless, wild stirring as the men jabbed the earth with cold spades and tore out the coffins and carried away the withered ancient bodies to be burned. Twisting with fear in his coffin, he had waited for them to come to him.

Today they had arrived at his coffin. But—late. They had dug down to within an inch of the lid. Five o'clock bell, time for quitting. Home to supper. The workers had gone off. Tomorrow they would finish the job, they said, shrugging into their coats.

Silence had come to the emptied tomb-yard.

Carefully, quietly, with a soft rattling of sod, the coffin lid had lifted.

William Lantry stood trembling now, in the last cemetery on Earth.

"Remember?" he asked himself, looking at the raw earth. "Remember those stories of the last man on earth? Those stories of men wandering in ruins, alone? Well, you, William Lantry, are a switch on the old story. Do you *know* that? You are the last *dead* man in the whole damned world!"

There were no more dead people. Nowhere in any land was there a dead person. Impossible? Lantry did not smile at this. No, not impossible at all in this foolish, sterile, unimaginative, antiseptic age of cleansings and scientific methods! People died, oh my god, yes. But—*dead* people? Corpses? They didn't exist!

What *happened* to dead people?

The graveyard was on a hill. William Lantry walked through the dark burning night until he reached the edge of the graveyard and looked down upon the new town of Salem. It was all illumination, all color. Rocket ships cut fire above it, crossing the sky to all the far ports of earth.

In his grave the new violence of this future world had driven down and seeped into William Lantry. He had been bathed in it for years. He knew all about it, with a hating dead man's knowledge of such things.

Most important of all, he knew what these fools did with dead men.

He lifted his eyes. In the center of the town a massive stone finger pointed at the stars. It was three hundred feet high and fifty feet across. There was a wide entrance and a drive in front of it.

In the town, theoretically, thought William Lantry, say you have a dying man. In a moment he will be dead. What happens? No sooner is his pulse cold when a certificate is flourished, made out, his relatives pack him into a car-beetle and drive him swiftly to—

The Incinerator!

That functional finger, that Pillar of Fire pointing at the stars. Incinerator. A functional, terrible name. But truth is truth in this future world.

Like a stick of kindling your Mr. Dead Man is shot into the furnace.

Flume!

William Lantry looked at the top of the gigantic pistol shoving at the stars. A small pennant of smoke issued from the top.

There's where your dead people go.

"Take care of yourself, William Lantry," he murmured. "You're the last one, the rare item, the last dead man. All the other graveyards of earth have been blasted up. This is the last graveyard and you're the last dead man from the centuries. These people don't believe in having dead people about, much less walking dead people. Everything that can't be used goes up like a matchstick. Superstitions' right along with it!"

He looked at the town. All right, he thought, quietly. I hate you. You hate me, or you *would* if you knew I existed. You don't believe in such things as vampires or ghosts. Labels without referents, you cry! You snort. All right, snort! Frankly, I don't believe in *you*, either! I don't *like* you! You and your Incinerators.

He trembled. How very close it had been. Day after day they had hauled out the other dead ones, burned them like so much kindling. An edict had been broadcast around the world. He had heard the

digging men talk as they worked!

"I guess it's a good idea, this cleaning up the graveyards," said one of the men.

"Guess so," said another. "Grisly custom. Can you imagine? Being buried, I mean! Unhealthy! All them germs!"

"Sort of a shame. Romantic, kind of. I mean, leaving just this one graveyard untouched all these centuries. The other graveyards were cleaned out, what year was it, Jim?"

"About 2260, I think. Yeah, that was it, 2260, almost a hundred years ago. But some Salem Committee they got on their high horse and they said, 'Look here, let's have just ONE graveyard left, to remind us of the customs of the barbarians.' And the government scratched its head, thunk it over, and said, 'Okay. Salem it is. But all other graveyards go, you understand, all!'"

"And away they went," said Jim.

"Sure, they sucked out 'em with fire and steam shovels and rocket-cleaners. If they knew a man was buried in a cow-pasture, they fixed him! Evacuated them, they did. Sort of cruel, I say."

"I hate to sound old-fashioned, but still there were a lot of tourists came here every year, just to see what a real graveyard was like."

"Right. We had nearly a million people in the last three years visiting. A good revenue. But—a government order is an order. The government says no more morbidity, so flush her out we do! Here we go. Hand me that spade, Bill."

WILLIAM LANTRY stood in the autumn wind, on the hill. It was good to walk again, to feel the wind and to hear the leaves scuttling like mice on the road ahead of him. It was good to see the bitter cold stars almost blown away by the wind.

It was even good to know fear again.

For fear rose in him now, and he could not put it away. The very fact that he was walking made him an enemy. And there was not another friend, another dead man, in all of the world, to whom one could turn for help or consolation. It was the whole melodramatic living world against one William Lantry. It was the whole vampire-disbelieving, body-burning, graveyard-annihilating world

against a man in a dark suit on a dark autumn hill. He put out his pale cold hands into the city illumination. You have pulled the tombstones, like teeth, from the yard, he thought. Now I will find some way to push your damnable Incinerators down into rubble. I will make dead people again, and I will make friends in so doing. I cannot be alone and lonely. I must start manufacturing friends very soon. Tonight.

"War is declared," he said, and laughed. It was pretty silly, one man declaring war on an entire world.

The world did not answer back. A rocket crossed the sky on a rush of flame, like an Incinerator taking wing.

Footsteps. Lantry hastened to the edge of the cemetery. The diggers, coming back to finish up their work? No. Just someone, a man, walking by.

As the man came abreast the cemetery gate, Lantry stepped swiftly out. "Good evening," said the man, smiling.

Lantry struck the man in the face. The man fell. Lantry bent quietly down and hit the man a killing blow across the neck with the side of his hand.

Dragging the body back into shadow, he stripped it, changed clothes with it. It wouldn't do for a fellow to go wandering about this future world with ancient clothing on. He found a small pocket knife in the man's coat; not much of a knife, but enough if you knew how to handle it properly. He knew how.

He rolled the body down into one of the already opened and exhumed graves. In a minute he had shoveled dirt down upon it, just enough to hide it. There was little chance of it being found. They wouldn't dig the same grave twice.

He adjusted himself in his new loose-fitting metallic suit. Fine, fine.

Hating, William Lantry walked down into town, to do battle with the Earth.

II

THE INCINERATOR WAS OPEN.

It never closed. There was a wide entrance, all lighted up with hidden illumination, there was a helicopter landing table and a beetle drive. The town itself was dying down after another day of the dynamo. The lights were going dim,

and the only quiet, lighted spot in the town now was the Incinerator. God, what a practical name, what an unromantic name.

William Lantry entered the wide, well-lighted door. It was an entrance, really; there were no doors to open or shut. People could go in and out, summer or winter, the inside was always warm. Warm from the fire that rushed whispering up the high round flue to where the whirlers, the propellers, the air-jets pushed the leafy grey ashes on away for a ten mile ride down the sky.

There was the warmth of the bakery here. The halls were floored with rubber parquet. You couldn't make a noise if you wanted to. Music played in hidden throats somewhere. Not music of death at all, but music of life and the way the sun lived inside the Incinerator; or the sun's brother, anyway. You could hear the flame floating inside the heavy brick wall.

William Lantry descended a ramp. Behind him he heard a whisper and turned in time to see a beetle stop before the entrance way. A bell rang. The music, as if at a signal, rose to ecstatic heights. There was joy in it.

From the beetle, which opened from the rear, some attendants stepped carrying a golden box. It was six feet long and there were sun symbols on it. From another beetle the relatives of the man in the box stepped and followed as the attendants took the golden box down a ramp to a kind of altar. On the side of the altar were the words, "WE THAT WERE BORN OF THE SUN RETURN TO THE SUN". The golden box was deposited upon the altar, the music leaped upward, the Guardian of this place spoke only a few words, then the attendants picked up the golden box, walked to a transparent wall, a safety lock, also transparent, and opened it. The box was shoved into the glass slot. A moment later an inner lock opened, the box was injected into the interior of the Flue and vanished instantly in quick flame.

The attendants walked away. The relatives without a word turned and walked out. The music played.

William Lantry approached the glass fire lock. He peered through the wall at

the vast, glowing, never-ceasing heart of the Incinerator. It burned steadily, without a flicker, singing to itself peacefully. It was so solid it was like a golden river flowing up out of the earth toward the sky. Anything you put into the river was borne upward, vanished.

Lantry felt again his unreasoning hatred of this thing, this monster, cleansing fire.

A man stood at his elbow. "May I help you, sir?"

"What?" Lantry turned abruptly. "What did you say?"

"May I be of service?"

"I—that is—" Lantry looked quickly at the ramp and the door. His hands trembled at his sides. "I've never been in here before."

"Never?" The Attendant was surprised.

That had been the wrong thing to say, Lantry realized. But it was said, nevertheless, "I mean," he said. "Not really. I mean, when you're a child, somehow, you don't pay attention. I suddenly realized tonight that I didn't really *know* the Incinerator."

The Attendant smiled. "We never know anything, do we, really? I'll be glad to show you around."

"Oh, no. Never mind. It—it's a wonderful place."

"Yes, it is." The Attendant took pride in it. "One of the finest in the world, I think."

"I—" Lantry felt he must explain further. "I haven't had many relatives die on me since I was a child. In fact, none. So, you see I haven't been here for many years."

"I see." The Attendant's face seemed to darken somewhat.

What've I said now, thought Lantry. What in God's name is wrong? What've I done? If I'm not careful I'll get myself shoved right into that damnable firetrap. What's wrong with this fellow's face? He seems to be giving me more than the usual going over.

"You wouldn't be one of the men who've just returned from Mars, would you?" asked the Attendant.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"No matter." The Attendant began to walk off. "If you want to know anything, just ask me."

"Just one thing," said Lantry.

"What's that?"

"This."

Lantry dealt him a stunning blow across the neck.

He had watched the fire-trap operator with expert eyes. Now, with the sagging body in his arms, he touched the button that opened the warm outer lock, placed the body in, heard the music rise, and saw the inner lock open. The body shot out into the river of fire. The music softened.

"Well done, Lantry, well done."

BARELY an instant later another Attendant entered the room. Lantry was caught with an expression of pleased excitement on his face. The Attendant looked around as if expecting to find someone, then he walked toward Lantry. "May I help you?"

"Just looking," said Lantry.

"Rather late at night," said the Attendant.

"I couldn't sleep."

That was the wrong answer, too. Everybody slept in this world. Nobody had insomnia. If you did you simply turned on a hypno-ray, and, sixty seconds later, you were snoring. Oh, he was just *full* of wrong answers. First he had made the fatal error of saying he had never been in the Incinerator before, when he knew damned well that all children were brought here on tours, every year, from the time they were four, to instill the idea of the clean fire death and the Incinerator in their minds. Death was a bright fire, death was warmth and the sun. It was not a dark, shadowed thing. That was important in their education. And he, pale thoughtless fool, had immediately gabbled out his ignorance.

And another thing, this paleness of his. He looked at his hands and realized with growing terror that a pale man also was non-existent in this world. They would suspect his paleness. That was why the first attendant had asked, "Are you one of those men newly returned from Mars?" Here, now, this new Attendant was clean and bright as a copper penny, his cheeks red with health and energy. Lantry hid his pale hands in his pockets. But he was fully aware of the searching the Attendant did on his face.

"I mean to say," said Lantry. "I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to think."

"Was there a service held here a moment ago?" asked the Attendant, looking about.

"I don't know, I just came in."

"I thought I heard the fire lock open and shut."

"I don't know," said Lantry.

The man pressed a wall button. "Anderson?"

A voice replied. "Yes."

"Locate Saul for me, will you?"

"I'll ring the corridors." A pause. "Can't find him."

"Thanks." The Attendant was puzzled. He was beginning to make little sniffing motions with his nose. "Do you—*smell* anything?"

Lantry sniffed. "No. Why?"

"I *smell* something."

Lantry took hold of the knife in his pocket. He waited.

"I remember once when I was a kid," said the man. "And we found a cow lying dead in the field. It had been there two days in the hot sun. That's what this smell is. I wonder what it's from?"

"Oh, I know what it is," said Lantry quietly. He held out his hand. "Here."

"What?"

"Me, of course."

"You?"

"Dead several hundred years."

"You're an odd joker." The Attendant was puzzled.

"Very." Lantry took out the knife. "Do you know what this is?"

"A knife."

"Do you ever use knives on people any more?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean—killing them, with knives or guns or poison?"

"You *are* an odd joker!" The man giggled awkwardly.

"I'm going to kill you," said Lantry.

"Nobody kills anybody," said the man.

"Not any more they don't. But they used to, in the old days."

"I know they did."

"This will be the first murder in three hundred years. I just killed your friend. I just shoved him into the fire lock."

That remark had the desired effect. It numbed the man so completely, it shocked

him so thoroughly with its illogical aspects that Lantry had time to walk forward. He put the knife against the man's chest.

"I'm going to kill you."

"That's silly," said the man, numbly.

"People don't do that."

"Like this," said Lantry. "You see?"

The knife slid into the chest. The man stared at it for a moment. Lantry caught the falling body.

III

THE SALEM FLUE EXPLODED at six that morning. The great fire chimney shattered into ten thousand parts and flung itself into the earth and into the sky and into the houses of the sleeping people. There was fire and sound, more fire than autumn made burning in the hills.

William Lantry was five miles away at the time of the explosion. He saw the town ignited by the great spreading cremation of it. And he shook his head and laughed a little bit and clapped his hands smartly together.

Relatively simple. You walked around killing people who didn't believe in murder, had only heard of it indirectly as some dim gone custom of the old barbarian races. You walked into the control room of the Incinerator and said, "How do you work this Incinerator?" and the control man told you, because everybody told the truth in this world of the future, nobody lied, there was no reason to lie, there was no danger to lie *against*. There was only one criminal in the world, and nobody knew HE existed yet.

Oh, it was an incredibly beautiful setup. The Control Man had told him just how the Incinerator worked, what pressure gauges controlled the flood of fire gasses going up the flue, what levers were adjusted or readjusted. He and Lantry had had quite a talk. It was an easy free world. People trusted people. A moment later Lantry had shoved a knife in the Control Man also and set the pressure gauges for an overload to occur half an hour later, and walked out of the Incinerator halls, whistling.

Now even the sky was palled with the vast black cloud of the explosion.

"This is only the first," said Lantry,

looking at the sky. "I'll tear all the others down before they even suspect there's an unethical man loose in their society. They can't account for a variable like me. I'm beyond their understanding. I'm incomprehensible, impossible, therefore I do not exist. My God, I can kill hundreds of thousands of them before they even realize murder is out in the world again. I can make it look like an accident each time. Why, the idea is so huge, it's unbelievable!"

The fire burned the town. He sat under a tree for a long time, until morning. Then, he found a cave in the hills, and went in, to sleep.

HE AWOKE at sunset with a sudden dream of fire. He saw himself pushed into the flue, cut into sections by flame, burned away to nothing. He sat up on the cave floor, laughing at himself. He had an idea.

He walked down into the town and stepped into an audio booth. He dialed OPERATOR. "Give me the Police Department," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" said the operator.

He tried again. "The Law Force," he said.

"I will connect you with the Peace Control," she said, at last.

A little fear began ticking inside him like a tiny watch. Suppose the operator recognized the term Police Department as an anachronism, took his audio number, and sent someone out to investigate? No, she wouldn't do that. Why should she suspect? Paranoids were non-existent in this civilization.

"Yes, the Peace Control," he said.

A buzz. A man's voice answered. "Peace Control. Stephens speaking."

"Give me the Homicide Detail," said Lantry, smiling.

"The what?"

"Who investigates murders?"

"I beg your pardon, what are you talking about?"

"Wrong number." Lantry hung up, chuckling. Ye gods, there was no such a thing as a Homicide Detail. There were no murders, therefore they needed no detectives. Perfect, perfect!

The audio rang back. Lantry hesitated, then answered.

"Say," said the voice on the phone. "Who are you?"

"The man just left who called," said Lantry, and hung up again.

He ran. They would recognize his voice and perhaps send someone out to check. People didn't lie. *He* had just lied. They knew his voice. He had lied. Anybody who lied needed a psychiatrist. They would come to pick him up to see why he was lying. For no *other* reason. They suspected him of nothing else. Therefore—he must run.

Oh, how very carefully he must act from now on. He knew nothing of this world, this odd straight truthful ethical world. Simply by looking pale you were suspect. Simply by not sleeping nights you were suspect. Simply by not bathing, by smelling like a—dead cow?—you were suspect. Anything.

He must go to a library. But that was dangerous, too. What were libraries like today? Did they have books or did they have film spools which projected books on a screen? Or did people have libraries at home, thus eliminating the necessity of keeping large main libraries?

He decided to chance it. His use of archaic terms might well make him suspect again, but now it was very important he learn all that could be learned of this foul world into which he had come again. He stopped a man on the street. "Which way to the library?"

The man was not surprised. "Two blocks east, one block north."

"Thank you."

Simple as that.

He walked into the library a few minutes later.

"May I help you?"

He looked at the librarian. May I help you, may I help you. What a world of helpful people! "I'd like to 'have' Edgar Allan Poe." His verb was carefully chosen. He didn't say 'read'. He was too afraid that books were passé, that printing itself was a lost art. Maybe all 'books' today were in the form of fully delineated three-dimensional motion pictures. How in hell could you make a motion picture out of Socrates, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud?

"What was that name again?"

"Edgar Allan Poe."

"There is no such author listed in our files."

"Will you please check?"

She checked. "Oh, yes. There's a red mark on the file card. He was one of the authors in the Great Burning of 2265."

"How ignorant of me."

"That's all right," she said. "Have you heard much of him?"

"He had some interesting barbarian ideas on death," said Lantry.

"Horrible ones," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Ghastly."

"Yes. Ghastly. Abominable, in fact. Good thing he was burned. Unclean. By the way, do you have any of Lovecraft?"

"Is that a sex book?"

Lantry exploded with laughter. "No, no. It's a man."

She riffled the file. "He was burned, too. Along with Poe."

"I suppose that applies to Machen and a man named Derleth and one named Ambrose Bierce, also?"

"Yes." She shut the file cabinet. "All burned. And good riddance." She gave him an odd warm look of interest. "I bet you've just come back from Mars."

"Why do you say that?"

"There was another explorer in here yesterday. He'd just made the Mars hop and return. He was interested in supernatural literature, also. It seems there are actually 'tombs' on Mars."

"What are 'tombs'?" Lantry was learning to keep his mouth closed.

"You know, those things they once buried people in."

"Barbarian custom. Ghastly!"

"Isn't it? Well, seeing the Martian tombs made this young explorer curious. He came and asked if we had any of those authors you mentioned. Of course we haven't even a smitch of their stuff." She looked at his pale face. "You *are* one of the Martian rocket men, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. "Got back on the ship the other day."

"The other young man's name was Burke."

"Of course. Burke! Good friend of mine!"

"Sorry I can't help you. You'd best get yourself some vitamin shots and some sun-lamp. You look terrible, Mr. —?"

"Lantry. I'll be good. Thanks ever so much. See you next Hallows' Eve!"

"Aren't you the clever one." She laughed. "If there *were* a Hallows' Eve, I'd make it a date."

"But they burned *that*, too," he said.

"Oh, they burned everything," she said. "Good night."

"Good night." And he went on out.

OH, how carefully he was balanced in this world! Like some kind of dark gyroscope, whirling with never a murmur, a very silent man. As he walked along the eight o'clock evening street he noticed with particular interest that there was not an unusual amount of lights about. There were the usual street lights at each corner, but the blocks themselves were only faintly illuminated. Could it be that these remarkable people were not *afraid of the dark*? Incredible nonsense! *Every one* was afraid of the dark. *Even he* himself had been afraid, as a child. It was as natural as eating.

A little boy ran by on pelting feet, followed by six others. They yelled and shouted and rolled on the dark cool October lawn, in the leaves. Lantry looked on for several minutes before addressing himself to one of the small boys who was for a moment taking a respite, gathering his breath into his small lungs, as a boy might blow to refill a punctured paper bag.

"Here, now," said Lantry. "You'll wear yourself out."

"Sure," said the boy.

"Could you tell me," said the man, "why there are no street lights in the middle of the blocks?"

"Why?" asked the boy.

"I'm a teacher, I thought I'd test your knowledge," said Lantry.

"Well," said the boy, "you don't need lights in the middle of the block, that's why."

"But it gets rather dark," said Lantry.

"So?" said the boy.

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Lantry.

"Of what?" asked the boy.

"The dark," said Lantry.

"Ho ho," said the boy. "Why should I be?"

"Well," said Lantry. "It's black, it's dark. And after all, street lights were

invented to take away the dark and take away fear."

"That's silly. Street lights were made so you could see where you were walking. Outside of that there's nothing."

"You miss the whole point—" said Lantry. "Do you mean to say you would sit in the middle of an empty lot all night and not be afraid?"

"Of what?"

"Of what, of what, of what, you little ninny! Of the dark!"

"Ho ho."

"Would you go out in the hills and stay all night in the dark?"

"Sure."

"Would you stay in a deserted house alone?"

"Sure."

"And not be afraid?"

"Sure."

"You're a liar!"

"Don't you call me nasty names!" shouted the boy. Liar was the improper noun, indeed. It seemed to be the worst thing you could call a person.

Lantry was completely furious with the little monster. "Look," he insisted. "Look into my eyes..."

The boy looked.

Lantry bared his teeth slightly. He put out his hands, making a clawlike gesture. He leered and gesticulated and wrinkled his face into a terrible mask of horror.

"Ho ho," said the boy. "You're funny."

"What did you say?"

"You're funny. Do it again. Hey, gang, c'mere! This man does funny things!"

"Never mind."

"Do it again, sir."

"Never mind, never mind. Good night!" Lantry ran off.

"Good night, sir. And mind the dark, sir!" called the little boy.

OF ALL the stupidity, of all the rank, gross, crawling, jelly-mouthed stupidity! He had never seen the like of it in his life! Bringing the children up without so much as an *ounce* of imagination! Where was the fun in being children if you didn't imagine things?

He stopped running. He slowed and for the first time began to appraise himself. He ran his hand over his face and bit his finger and found that he himself

was standing midway in the block and he felt uncomfortable. He moved up to the street corner where there was a glowing lantern. "That's better," he said, holding his hands out like a man to an open warm fire.

He listened. There was not a sound except the night breathing of the crickets. Faintly there was a fire-hush as a rocket swept the sky. It was the sound a torch might make brandished gently on the dark air.

He listened to himself and for the first time he realized what there was so peculiar to himself. There was not a sound in him. The little nostril and lung noises were absent. His lungs did not take nor give oxygen or carbon-dioxide; they did not move. The hairs in his nostrils did not quiver with warm combing air. That faint purring whisper of breathing did not sound in his nose. Strange. Funny. A noise you never heard when you were alive, the breath that fed your body, and yet, once dead, oh how you missed it!

The only other time you ever heard it was on deep dreamless awake nights when you wakened and listened and heard first your nose taking and gently poking out the air, and then the dull deep dim red thunder of the blood in your temples, in your eardrums, in your throat, in your aching wrists, in your warm loins, in your chest. All of those little rhythms, gone. The wrist beat gone, the throat pulse gone, the chest vibration gone. The sound of the blood coming up down around and through, up down around and through. Now it was like listening to a statue.

And yet he *lived*. Or, rather, moved about. And how was this done, over and above scientific explanations, theories, doubts?

By one thing, and one thing alone.

Hatred.

Hatred was a blood in him, it went up down around and through, up down around and through. It was a heart in him, not beating, true, but warm. He was—what? Resentment. Envy. They said he could not lie any longer in his coffin in the cemetery. He had *wanted* to. He had never had any particular desire to get up and walk around. It had been enough, all these centuries, to lie in the deep box

and feel but *not feel* the ticking of the million insect watches in the earth around, the moves of worms like so many deep thoughts in the soil.

But then they had come and said, "Out you go and into the furnace!" And that is the worst thing you can say to any man. You cannot tell him what to do. If you say you are dead, he will want not to be dead. If you say there are no such things as vampires, by God, that man will try to *be* one just for spite. If you say a dead man cannot walk he will test his limbs. If you say murder is no longer occurring, he will make it occur. He was, *in toto*, all the impossible things. They had given birth to him with their damnable practices and ignorances. Oh, how wrong they were. They needed to be shown. He would *show* them! Sun is *good*, so is *night*, there is nothing wrong with dark, *they* said.

Dark is horror, he shouted, silently, facing the little houses. It is *meant* for contrast. You must fear, you hear! That has always been the way of this world. You destroyers of Edgar Allan Poe and fine big-worded Lovecraft, you burner of Halloween masks and destroyer of pumpkin jack-o-lanterns! I will make night what it *once* was, the thing against which man built all his lanterned cities and his many children!

As if in answer to this, a rocket, flying low, trailing a long rakish feather of flame. It made Lantry flinch and draw back.

IV

IT WAS BUT TEN MILES TO THE little town of Science Port. He made it by dawn, walking. But even this was not good. At four in the morning a silver beetle pulled up on the road beside him.

"Hello," called the man inside.

"Hello," said Lantry, wearily.

"Why are you walking?" asked the man.

"I'm going to Science Port."

"Why don't you ride?"

"I *like* to walk."

"Nobody likes to walk. Are you sick? May I give you a ride?"

"Thanks, but I like to walk."

The man hesitated, then closed the beetle door. "Good night."

When the beetle was gone over the hill, Lantry retreated into a nearby forest. A world full of bungling helping people. By God, you couldn't even *walk* without being accused of sickness. That meant only one thing. He must not walk any longer, he had to ride. He should have accepted that fellow's offer.

The rest of the night he walked far enough off the highway so that if a beetle rushed by he had time to vanish in the underbrush. At dawn he crept into an empty dry water-drain and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

The dream was as perfect as a rimed snowflake.

He saw the graveyard where he had lain deep and ripe over the centuries. He heard the early morning footsteps of the laborers returning to finish their work.

"Would you mind passing me the shovel, Jim?"

"Here you go."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

"What's up?"

"Look here. We didn't finish last night, did we?"

"No."

"There was one more coffin, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

"Well, here it is, and open!"

"You've got the wrong hole."

"What's the name say on the gravestone?"

"Lantry. William Lantry."

"That's him, that's the one! Gone!"

"What could have happened to it?"

"How do I know. The body was here last night."

"We can't be sure, we didn't look."

"God, man, people don't bury empty coffins. He was in his box. Now he isn't."

"Maybe this box was empty."

"Nonsense. Smell that smell? He was here all right."

A pause.

"Nobody would have taken the body, would they?"

"What for?"

"A curiosity, perhaps."

"Don't be ridiculous. People just don't steal. Nobody steals."

"Well, then, there's only one solution."

"And?"

"He got up and walked away."

A pause. In the dark dream, Lantry expected to hear laughter. There was none. Instead, the voice of the gravedigger, after a thoughtful pause, said, "Yes. That's it, indeed. He got up and walked away."

"That's interesting to think about," said the other.

"Isn't it, though?"

Silence.

* * * * *

Lantry awoke. It had all been a dream, but God, how realistic. How strangely the two men had carried on. But not unnaturally, oh, no. That was exactly how you expected men of the future to talk. Men of the future. Lantry grinned wryly. That was an anachronism for you. This was the future. This was happening now. It wasn't 300 years from now, it was now, not then, or any other time. This wasn't the Twentieth Century. Oh, how calmly those two men in the dream had said, "He got up and walked away." "—interesting to think about." "Isn't it, though?" With never a quaver in their voices. With not so much as a glance over their shoulders or a tremble of spade in hand. But, of course, with their perfectly honest, logical minds, there was but one explanation; certainly nobody had stolen the corpse. "Nobody steals." The corpse had simply got up and walked off. The corpse was the only one who could have possibly moved the corpse. By the few casual slow words of the gravediggers Lantry knew what they were thinking. Here was a man that had lain in suspended animation, not really dead, for hundreds of years. The jarring about, the activity, had brought him back.

Everyone had heard of those little green toads that are sealed for centuries inside mud rocks or in ice patties, alive, alive oh! And how when scientists chipped them out and warmed them like marbles in their hands the little toads leapt about and frisked and blinked. Then it was only logical that the gravediggers think of William Lantry in like fashion.

But what if the various parts were fitted together in the next day or so? If the vanished body and the shattered, ex-

ploded incinerator were connected? What if this fellow named Burke, who had returned pale from Mars, went to the library again and said to the young woman he wanted some books and she said, "Oh, your friend Lantry was in the other day." And he'd say, 'Lantry who? Don't know anyone by that name.' And she'd say, "Oh, he lied." And people in this time didn't lie. So it would all form and coalesce, item by item, bit by bit. A pale man who was pale and shouldn't be pale had lied and people don't lie, and a walking man on a lonely country road had walked and people don't walk anymore, and a body was missing from a cemetery, and the Incinerator had blown up and and and—

They would come after him. They would find him. He would be easy to find. He walked. He lied. He was pale. They would find him and take him and stick him through the open fire-lock of the nearest Burner and that would be your Mr. William Lantry, like a fourth of July set-piece!

There was only one thing to be done efficiently and completely. He arose in violent moves. His lips were wide and his dark eyes were flared and there was a trembling and burning all through him. He must kill and kill and kill and kill and kill. He must make his enemies into friends, into people like himself who walked but shouldn't walk, who were pale in a land of pinks. He must kill and then kill and then kill again. He must make bodies and dead people and corpses. He must destroy Incinerator after Flue after Burner after Incinerator. Explosion on explosion. Death on death. Then, when the Incinerators were all in thrown ruin, and the hastily established morgues were jammed with the bodies of people shattered by the explosion, then he would begin his making of friends, his enrollment of the dead in his own cause.

Before they traced and found and killed him, they must be killed themselves. So far he was safe. He could kill and they would not kill back. People simply do not go around killing. That was his safety margin. He climbed out of the abandoned drain, stood in the road.

He took the knife from his pocket and hailed the next beetle.

IT WAS LIKE the Fourth of July! The biggest damned firecracker of them all. The Science Port Incinerator split down the middle and flew apart. It made a thousand small explosions that ended with a greater one. It fell upon the town and crushed houses and burned trees. It woke people from sleep and then put them to sleep again, forever, an instant later.

William Lantry, sitting in a beetle that was not his own, tuned idly to a station on the audio dial. The collapse of the Incinerator had killed some four hundred people. Many had been caught in flattened houses, others struck by flying metal. A temporary morgue was being set up at—

An address was given.

Lantry noted it with a pad and pencil.

He could go on this way, he thought, from town to town, from country to country, destroying the Burners, the Pillars of Fire, until the whole clean magnificent framework of flame and cauterization was tumbled. He made a fair estimate—each explosion averaged five hundred dead. You could work that up to a hundred thousand in no time.

He pressed the floor stud of the beetle. Smiling, he drove off through the dark streets of the city.

THE city coroner had requisitioned an old warehouse. From midnight until four in the morning the grey beetles hissed down the rain-shiny streets, turned in, and the bodies were laid out on the cold concrete floors, with white sheets over them. It was a continuous flow until about four-thirty, then it stopped. There were about two hundred bodies there, white and cold.

The bodies were left alone; nobody stayed behind to tend them. There was no use tending the dead; it was a useless procedure; the dead could take care of themselves.

About five o'clock, with a touch of dawn in the east, the first trickle of relatives arrived to identify their sons or their fathers or their mothers or their uncles. The people moved quickly into the warehouse, made the identification, moved quickly out again. By six o'clock, with the sky still lighter in the east, this trickle had passed on, also.

William Lantry walked across the wide

wet street and entered the warehouse.

He held a piece of blue chalk in one hand.

He walked by the coroner who stood in the entranceway talking to two others. ". . . drive the bodies to the Incinerator in Mellin Town, tomorrow . . ." The voices faded.

Lantry moved, his feet echoing faintly on the cool concrete. A wave of sourceless relief came to him as he walked among the shrouded figures. He was among his own. And—better than that, by God! he had *created* these! He had made them dead! He had procured for himself a vast number of recumbent friends!

Was the coroner watching? Lantry turned his head. No. The warehouse was calm and quiet and shadowed in the dark morning. The coroner was walking away now, across the street, with his two attendants; a beetle had drawn up on the other side of the street, and the coroner was going over to talk with whoever was in the beetle.

William Lantry stood and made a blue chalk pentagram on the floor by each of the bodies. He moved swiftly, swiftly, without a sound, without blinking. In a few minutes, glancing up now and then to see if the coroner was still busy, he had chalked the floor by a hundred bodies. He straightened up and put the chalk in his pocket.

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party, now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party, now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party, now is the time . . .

Lying in the earth, over the centuries, the processes and thoughts of passing peoples and passing times had seeped down to him, slowly, as into a deep-buried sponge. From some death-memory in him now, ironically, repeatedly, a black typewriter clacked out black even lines of pertinent words:

Now is the time for all good men, for all good men, to come to the aid of—
William Lantry.

Other words—

Arise my love, and come away—

The quick brown fox jumped over...
Paraphrase it. The quick risen body jumped over the tumbled Incinerator...

Lazarus, come forth from the tomb...

He knew the right words. He need only speak them as they had been spoken over the centuries. He need only gesture with his hands and speak the words, the dark words that would cause these bodies to quiver, rise and walk!

And when they had risen he would take them through the town, they would kill others and the others would rise and walk. By the end of the day there would be thousands of good friends walking with him. And what of the naive, living people of this year, this day, this hour? They would be completely unprepared for it. They would go down to defeat because they would not be expecting war of any sort. They wouldn't believe it possible, it would all be over before they could convince themselves that such an illogical thing could happen.

He lifted his hands. His lips moved. He said the words. He began in a chanting whisper and then raised his voice, louder. He said the words again and again. His eyes were closed tightly. His body swayed. He spoke faster and faster. He began to move forward among the bodies. The dark words flowed from his mouth. He was enchanted with his own formulae. He stooped and made further blue symbols on the concrete, in the fashion of long-dead sorcerers, smiling, confident. Any moment now the first tremor of the still bodies, any moment now the rising, the leaping up of the cold ones!

His hands lifted in the air. His head nodded. He spoke, he spoke, he spoke. He gestured. He talked loudly over the bodies, his eyes flaring, his body tensed. "Now!" he cried, violently. "Rise, *all* of you!"

Nothing happened.

"Rise!" he screamed, with a terrible torment in his voice.

The sheets lay in white blue-shadow folds over the silent bodies.

"Hear me, and act!" he shouted.

Far away, on the street, a beetle hissed along.

Again, again, again he shouted, pleaded. He got down by each body and asked of it his particular violent favor. No reply. He strode wildly between the even white rows, flinging his arms up, stooping again and again to make blue symbols!

Lantry was very pale. He licked his lips. "Come on, get up," he said. "They have, they always have, for a thousand years. When you make a mark—so! and speak a word—so! they always rise! Why not you now, why not you! Come on, come on, before *they* come back!"

The warehouse went up into shadow. There were steel beams across and down. In it, under the roof, there was not a sound, except the raving of a lonely man.

Lantry stopped.

Through the wide doors of the warehouse he caught a glimpse of the last cold stars of morning.

This was the year 2349.

His eyes grew cold and his hands fell to his sides. He did not move.

ONCE upon a time people shuddered when they heard the wind about the house, once people raised crucifixes and wolfbane, and believed in walking dead and bats and loping white wolves. And as long as they believed, then so long did the dead, the bats, the loping wolves exist. The mind gave birth and reality to them.

But...

He looked at the white sheeted bodies. *These* people did not believe.

They had never believed. They would never believe. They had never imagined that the dead might walk. The dead went up flues in flame. They had never heard superstition, never trembled or shuddered or doubted in the dark. Walking dead people could not exist, they were illogical. This was the year 2349, man, after all!

Therefore, these people could not rise, could not walk again. They were dead and flat and cold. Nothing, chalk, imprecation, superstition, could wind them up and set them walking. They were dead and *knew* they were dead!

He was alone.

There were live people in the world who moved and drove beetles and drank quiet drinks in little dimly illumined bars by country roads, and kissed women and talked much good talk all day and every day.

But he was not alive.

Friction gave him what little warmth he possessed.

There were two hundred dead people

here in this warehouse now, cold upon the floor. The first dead people in a hundred years who were allowed to be corpses for an extra hour or more. The first not to be immediately trundled to the Incinerator and lit like so much phosphorous.

He should be happy with them, among them.

He was not.

They were completely dead. They did not know nor believe in walking once the heart had paused and stilled itself. They were deader than dead ever was.

He was indeed alone, more alone than any man had ever been. He felt the chill of his aloneness moving up into his chest, strangling him quietly.

William Lantry turned suddenly and gasped.

While he had stood there, someone had entered the warehouse. A tall man with white hair, wearing a light-weight tan overcoat and no hat. How long the man had been nearby there was no telling.

There was no reason to stay here. Lantry turned and started to walk slowly out. He looked hastily at the man as he passed and the man with the white hair looked back at him, curiously. Had he heard? The imprecations, the pleadings, the shoutings? Did he suspect? Lantry slowed his walk. Had this man seen him make the blue chalk marks? But then, would he interpret them as symbols of an ancient superstition? Probably not.

Reaching the door, Lantry paused. For a moment he did not want to do anything but lie down and be coldly, really dead again and be carried silently down the street to some distant burning flue and there dispatched in ash and whispering fire. If he was indeed alone and there was no chance to collect an army to his cause, what, then, existed as a reason for going on? Killing? Yes, he'd kill a few thousand more. But that wasn't enough. You can only do so much of that before they drag you down.

He looked at the cold sky.

A rocket went across the black heaven, trailing fire.

Mars burned red among a million stars.

Mars. The library. The librarian. Talk. Returning rocket men. Tombs.

Lantry almost gave a shout. He restrained his hand, which wanted so much

to reach up into the sky and touch Mars. Lovely red star on the sky. Good star that gave him sudden new hope. If he had a living heart now it would be thrashing wildly, and sweat would be breaking out of him and his pulses would be stammering, and tears would be in his eyes!

He would go down to where ever the rockets sprang up into space. He would go to Mars, one way or another. He would go to the Martian tombs. There, there, by God, were bodies, he would bet his last hatred on it, that would rise and walk and work with him! There was an ancient culture, much different from that of Earth, patterned on the Egyptian, if what the librarian had said was true. And the Egyptian—what a crucible of dark superstition and midnight terror that culture had been! Mars it *was*, then. Beautiful Mars!

But he must not attract attention to himself. He must move carefully. He wanted to run, yes, to get away, but that would be the worst possible move he could make. The man with the white hair was glancing at Lantry from time to time, in the entranceway. There were too many people about. If anything happened he would be outnumbered. So far he had taken on only *one* man at a time.

Lantry forced himself to stop and stand on the steps before the warehouse. The man with the white hair came on onto the steps also and stood, looking at the sky. He looked as if he was going to speak at any moment. He fumbled in his pockets, took out a packet of cigarettes.

V

THEY STOOD OUTSIDE THE morgue together, the tall pink, white-haired man, and Lantry, hands in their pockets. It was a cool night with a white shell of a moon that washed a house here, a road there, and further on, parts of a river.

"Cigarette?" The man offered Lantry one.

"Thanks."

They lit up together. The man glanced at Lantry's mouth. "Cool night."

"Cool."

They shifted their feet. "Terrible accident."

"Terrible."

"So many dead."

"So many."

Lantry felt himself some sort of delicate weight upon a scale. The other man did not seem to be looking at him, but rather listening and feeling toward him. There was a feathery balance here that made for vast discomfort. He wanted to move away and get out from under this balancing, weighing. The tall white-haired man said, "My name's McClure."

"Did you have any friends inside?" asked Lantry.

"No. A casual acquaintance. Awful accident."

"Awful."

They balanced each other. A beetle hissed by on the road with its seventeen tires whirling quietly. The moon showed a little town further over in the black hills.

"I say," said the man McClure.

"Yes."

"Could you answer me a question?"

"Be glad to." He loosened the knife in his coat pocket, ready.

"Is your name Lantry?" asked the man at last.

"Yes."

"William Lantry?"

"Yes."

"Then you're the man who came out of the Salem graveyard day before yesterday, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Good Lord, I'm glad to meet you, Lantry! We've been trying to find you for the past twenty-four hours!"

The man seized his hand, pumped it, slapped him on the back.

"What, what?" said Lantry.

"Good Lord, man, why did you run off? Do you realize what an instance this is? We want to talk to you!"

McClure was smiling, glowing. Another handshake, another slap. "I thought it was you!"

The man is mad, thought Lantry. Absolutely mad. Here I've toppled his incinerators, killed people, and he's shaking my hand. Mad, mad!

"Will you come along to the Hall?" said the man, taking his elbow.

"Wh-what hall?" Lantry stepped back.

"The Science Hall, of course. It isn't

every year we get a real case of suspended animation. In small animals, yes, but in a man, hardly! Will you come?"

"What's the act!" demanded Lantry, glaring. "What's all this talk."

"My dear fellow, what do you mean?" the man was stunned.

"Never mind. Is that the only reason you want to see me?"

"What other reason would there be, Mr. Lantry? You don't know how glad I am to see you!" He almost did a little dance. "I suspected. When we were in there together. You being so pale and all. And then the way you smoked your cigarette, something about it, and a lot of other things, all subliminal. But it is you, isn't it, it is you!"

"It is I, William Lantry." Dryly.

"Good fellow! Come along!"

THE BEETLE moved swiftly through the dawn streets. McClure talked rapidly.

Lantry sat, listening, astounded. Here was this fool, McClure, playing his cards for him! Here was this stupid scientist, or whatever, accepting him not as a suspicious baggage, a murderous item. Oh no! Quite the contrary! Only as a suspended animation case was he considered! Not as a dangerous man at all. Far from it!

"Of course," cried McClure, grinning. "You didn't know where to go, whom to turn to. It was all quite incredible to you."

"Yes."

"I had a feeling you'd be there at the morgue tonight," said McClure, happily.

"Oh?" Lantry stiffened.

"Yes. Can't explain it. But you, how shall I put it? Ancient Americans? You had funny ideas on death. And you were among the dead so long, I felt you'd be drawn back by the accident, by the morgue and all. It's not very logical. Silly, in fact. It's just a feeling. I hate feelings but there it was. I came on a, I guess you'd call it a hunch, wouldn't you?"

"You might call it that."

"And there you were!"

"There I was," said Lantry.

"Are you hungry?"

"I've eaten."

"How did you get around?"

"I hitch-hiked."

"You *what*?"

"People gave me rides on the road."

"Remarkable."

"I imagine it sounds that way." He looked at the passing houses. "So this is the era of space travel, is it?"

"Oh, we've been traveling to Mars for some forty years now."

"Amazing. And those big funnels, those towers in the middle of every town?"

"Those. Haven't you heard? The Incinerators. Oh, of course, they hadn't anything of that sort in your time. Had some bad luck with them. An explosion in Salem and one here, all in a forty-eight hour period. You looked as if you were going to speak; what is it?"

"I was thinking," said Lantry. "How fortunate I got out of my coffin when I did. I might well have been thrown into one of your Incinerators and burned up."

"That would have been terrible, wouldn't it have?"

"Quite."

Lantry toyed with the dials on the beetle dash. He wouldn't go to Mars. His plans were changed. If this fool simply refused to recognize an act of violence when he stumbled upon it, then let him be a fool. If they didn't connect the two explosions with a man from the tomb, all well and good. Let them go on deluding themselves. If they couldn't imagine someone being mean and nasty and murderous, heaven help them. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction. No, no Martian trip for you, as yet, Lantry lad. First we'll see what can be done boring from the inside. Plenty of time. The Incinerators can wait an extra week or so. One has to be subtle, you know. Any more immediate explosions might cause quite a ripple of thought.

McClure was gabbling wildly on.

"Of course, you don't have to be examined immediately. You'll want a rest. I'll put you up at my place."

"Thanks. I don't feel up to being probed and pulled. Plenty of time in a week or so."

They drew up before a house and climbed out.

"You'll want to sleep, naturally."

"I've been asleep for centuries. Be glad to stay awake. I'm not a bit tired."

"Good." McClure let them into the house. He headed for the drink bar. "A drink will fix us up."

"You have one," said Lantry. "Later for me. I just want to sit down."

"By all means sit." McClure mixed himself a drink. He looked around the room, looked at Lantry, paused for a moment with the drink in his hand, tilted his head to one side, and put his tongue in his cheek. Then he shrugged and stirred the drink. He walked slowly to a chair and sat, sipping the drink quietly. He seemed to be listening for something. "There are cigarettes on the table," he said.

"Thanks." Lantry took one and lit it and smoked it. He did not speak for some time.

Lantry thought, I'm taking this all too easily. Maybe I should kill and run. He's the only one that has found me, yet. Perhaps this is all a trap. Perhaps we're simply sitting here waiting for the police. Or whatever in hell they use for police these days. He looked at McClure. No. They weren't waiting for police. They were waiting for something else.

McClure didn't speak. He looked at Lantry's face and he looked at Lantry's hands. He looked at Lantry's chest a long time, with easy quietness. He sipped his drink. He looked at Lantry's feet.

Finally he said, "Where'd you get the clothing?"

"I asked someone for clothes and they gave these things to me. Darned nice of them."

"You'll find that's how we are in this world. All you have to do is ask."

McClure shut up again. His eyes moved. Only his eyes and nothing else. Once or twice he lifted his drink.

A little clock ticked somewhere in the distance.

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Lantry."

"Nothing much to tell."

"You're modest."

"Hardly. You know about the past. I know nothing of the future, or I should say 'today' and day before yesterday. You don't learn much in a coffin."

McClure did not speak. He suddenly

sat forward in his chair and then leaned back and shook his head.

They'll never suspect me, thought Lantry. They aren't superstitious, they simply *can't* believe in a dead man walking. Therefore, I'll be safe. I'll keep putting off the physical checkup. They're polite. They won't force me. Then, I'll work it so I can get to Mars. After that, the tombs, in my own good time, and the plan. God, how simple. How naive these people are."

McCLURE sat across the room for five minutes. A coldness had come over him. The color was very slowly going from his face, as one sees the color of medicine vanishing as one presses the bulb at the top of a dropper. He leaned forward, saying nothing, and offered another cigarette to Lantry.

"Thanks." Lantry took it. McClure sat deeply back into his easy chair, his knees folded one over the other. He did not look at Lantry, and yet somehow did. The feeling of weighing and balancing returned. McClure was like a tall thin master of hounds listening for something that nobody else could hear. There are little silver whistles you can blow that only dogs can hear. McClure seemed to be listening acutely, sensitively for such an invisible whistle, listening with his eyes and with his half-opened, dry mouth, and with his aching, breathing nostrils.

Lantry sucked the cigarette, sucked the cigarette, sucked the cigarette, and, as many times, blew out, blew out, blew out. McClure was like some lean red-shagged hound listening and listening with a slick slide of eyes to one side, with an apprehension in that hand that was so precisely microscopic that one only sensed it, as one sensed the invisible whistle, with some part of the brain deeper than eyes or nostril or ear. McClure was all chemist's scale, all antennae.

The room was so quiet the cigarette smoke made some kind of invisible noise rising to the ceiling. McClure was a thermometer, a chemist's scales, a listening hound, a litmus paper, an antennae; all these. Lantry did not move. Perhaps the feeling would pass. It had passed before. McClure did not move for a long while and then, without a word, he nodded at the sherry decanter, and Lantry refused

as silently. They sat looking but not looking at each other, again and away, again and away.

McClure stiffened slowly. Lantry saw the color getting paler in those lean cheeks, and the hand tightening on the sherry glass, and a knowledge come at last to stay, never to go away, into the eyes.

Lantry did not move. He could not. All of this was of such a fascination that he wanted only to see, to hear what would happen next. It was McClure's show from here on in.

McClure said, "At first I thought it was the finest psychosis I have ever seen. You, I mean, I thought, he's convinced himself, Lantry's convinced himself, he's quite insane, he's told himself to do all these little things." McClure talked as if in a dream, and continued talking and didn't stop.

"I said to myself, he purposely doesn't breathe through his nose. I watched your nostrils, Lantry. The little nostril hairs never once quivered in the last hour. That wasn't enough. It was a fact I filed. It wasn't enough. He breathes through his mouth, I said, on purpose. And then I gave you a cigarette and you sucked and blew, sucked and blew. None of it ever came out your nose. I told myself, well, that's all right. He doesn't inhale. Is that terrible, is that suspect? All in the mouth, all in the mouth. And then, I looked at your chest. I watched. It never moved up or down, it did nothing. He's convinced himself, I said to myself. He's convinced himself about all this. He doesn't move his chest, except slowly, when he thinks you're not looking. That's what I told myself."

The words went on in the silent room, not pausing, still in a dream. "And then I offered you a drink but you don't drink and I thought, he doesn't drink, I thought. Is *that* terrible? And I watched and watched you all this time. Lantry holds his breath, he's fooling himself. But now, yes, now, I understand it quite well. Now I know everything the way it is. Do you know how I know? I do not hear breathing in the room. I wait and I hear nothing. There is no beat of heart or intake of lung. The room is so silent. Nonsense, one might say, but I know. At the Incinerator I know. There is a difference. You enter a room where a man is on a bed and you know immediately whether he will look up

and speak to you or whether he will not speak to you ever again. Laugh if you will, but one can tell. It is a subliminal thing. It is the whistle the dog hears when no human hears. It is the tick of a clock that has ticked so long one no longer notices. Something is in a room when a man lives in it. Something is not in the room when a man is dead in it."

McCLURE shut his eyes a moment. He put down his sherry glass. He waited a moment. He took up his cigarette and puffed it and then put it down in a black tray.

"I am alone in this room," he said.

Lantry did not move.

"You are dead," said McClure. "My mind does not know this. It is not a thinking thing. It is a thing of the senses and the subconscious. At first I thought, this man *thinks* he is dead, risen from the dead, a vampire. Is that not logical? Would not any man, buried as many centuries, raised in a superstitious, ignorant culture, think likewise of himself once risen from the tomb? Yes, that is logical. This man has hypnotized himself and fitted his bodily functions so that they would in no way interfere with his self-delusion, his great paranoia. He governs his breathing. He tells himself, I cannot hear my breathing, therefore I am dead. His inner mind censors the sound of breathing. He does not allow himself to eat or drink. These things he probably does in his sleep, with part of his mind, hiding the evidences of this humanity from his deluded mind at other times."

McClure finished it. "I was wrong. You are not insane. You are not deluding yourself. Nor me. This is all very illogical and—I must admit—almost frightening. Does that make you feel good, to think you frighten me? I have no label for you. You're a very odd man, Lantry. I'm glad to have met you. This will make an interesting report indeed."

"Is there anything wrong with me being dead?" said Lantry. "Is it a crime?"

"You must admit it's highly unusual."

"But, still now, is it a crime?" asked Lantry.

"We have no crime, no criminal court. We want to examine you, naturally, to find out how you have happened. It is like

that chemical which, one minute is inert, the next is living cell. Who can say where what happened to what. You are that impossibility. It is enough to drive a man quite insane."

"Will I be released when you are done fingering me?"

"You will not be held. If you don't wish to be examined, you will not be. But I am hoping you will help by offering us your services."

"I might," said Lantry.

"But tell me," said McClure. "What were you doing at the morgue?"

"Nothing."

"I heard you talking when I came in."

"I was merely curious."

"You're lying. That is very bad, Mr. Lantry. The truth is far better. The truth is, is it not, that you are dead and, being the only one of your sort, were lonely. Therefore you killed people to have company."

"How does that follow?"

McClure laughed. "Logic, my dear fellow. Once I *knew* you were really dead, a moment ago, really a—what do you call it—a vampire (silly word!) I tied you immediately to the Incinerator blasts. Before that there was no reason to connect you. But once the one piece fell into place, the fact that you were dead, then it was simple to guess your loneliness, your hate, your envy, all of the tawdry motivations of a walking corpse. It took only an instant then to see the Incinerators blown to blazes, and then to think of you, among the bodies at the morgue, seeking help, seeking friends and people like yourself to work with—"

"You're too damned smart!" Lantry was out of the chair. He was half way to the other man when McClure rolled over and scuttled away, flinging the sherry decanter. With a great despair Lantry realized that, like a damned idiot, he had thrown away his one chance to kill McClure. He should have done it earlier. It had been Lantry's one weapon, his safety margin. If people in a society never *killed* each other, they never *suspected* one another. You could walk up to any one of them and kill him. "Come back here!" Lantry threw the knife.

McClure got behind a chair. The idea of flight, of protection, of fighting, was still

new to him. He had part of the idea, but there was still a bit of luck on Lantry's side if Lantry wanted to use it.

"Oh, no," said McClure, holding the chair between himself and the advancing man. "You want to kill me. It's odd, but true. I can't understand it. You want to cut me with that knife or something like that, and it's up to me to prevent you from doing such an odd thing."

"I will kill you!" Lantry let it slip out. He cursed himself. That was the worst possible thing to say.

Lantry lunged across the chair, clutching at McClure.

McClure was very logical. "It won't do you any good to kill me. You *know* that." They wrestled and held each other in a wild, toppling shuffle. Tables fell over, scattering articles. "You remember what happened in the morgue?"

"I don't care!" screamed Lantry.

"You didn't raise *those* dead, did you?"

"I don't care!" cried Lantry.

"Look here," said McClure, reasonably. "There will never be any more like you, ever, there's no use."

"Then I'll destroy all of you, all of you!" screamed Lantry.

"And then what? You'll still be alone, with no more like you about."

"I'll go to Mars. They have tombs there. I'll find more like myself!"

"No," said McClure. "The executive order went through yesterday. All of the tombs are being deprived of their bodies. They'll be burned in the next week."

They fell together to the floor. Lantry got his hands on McClure's throat.

"Please," said McClure. "Do you see, you'll die."

"What do you mean?" cried Lantry.

"Once you kill all of us, and you're alone, you'll die! The hate will die. That hate is what moves you, *nothing else*! That envy moves you. *Nothing else*! You'll die, inevitably. You're not immortal. You're not even alive, you're nothing but a moving hate."

"I don't care!" screamed Lantry, and began choking the man, beating his head with his fists, crouched on the defenseless body. McClure looked up at him with dying eyes.

The front door opened. Two men came in.

"I say," said one of them. "What's going on? A new game?"

Lantry jumped back and began to run.

"Yes, a new game!" said McClure, struggling up. "Catch him and you win!"

The two men caught Lantry. "We win," they said.

"Let me go!" Lantry thrashed, hitting them across their faces, bringing blood.

"Hold him tight!" cried McClure.

They held him.

"A rough game, what?" one of them said. "What do we do *now*?"

THE BEETLE hissed along the shining road. Rain fell out of the sky and a wind ripped at the dark green wet trees. In the beetle, his hands on the half-wheel, McClure was talking. His voice was a susurrant, a whispering, a hypnotic thing. The two other men sat in the back seat. Lantry sat, or rather lay, in the front seat, his head back, his eyes faintly open, the glowing green light of the dash dials showing on his cheeks. His mouth was relaxed. He did not speak.

McClure talked quietly and logically, about life and moving, about death and not moving, about the sun and the great sun Incinerator, about the emptied tombyard, about hatred and how hate lived and made a clay man live and move, and how illogical it all was, it all was, it all was. One was dead, was dead, was dead, that was all, all, all. One did not try to be otherwise. The car whispered on the moving road. The rain spatted gently on the windshield. The men in the back seat conversed quietly. Where were they going, going? To the Incinerator, of course. Cigarette smoke moved slowly up on the air, curling and tying into itself in grey loops and spirals. One was dead and must accept it.

Lantry did not move. He was a marionette, the strings cut. There was only a tiny hatred in his heart, in his eyes, like twin coals, feeble, glowing, fading.

I am Poe, he thought. I am all that is left of Edgar Allan Poe, and I am all that is left of Ambrose Bierce and all that is left of a man named Lovecraft. I am a grey night bat with sharp teeth, and I am a square black monolith monster. I am Osiris and Bal and Set. I am the Necronomicon, the Book of the Dead, I am the house of Usher, falling into flame. I am

the Red Death. I am the man mortared into the catacomb with a cask of Amontillado . . . I am a dancing skeleton. I am a coffin, a shroud, a lightning bolt reflected in an old house window. I am an autumn-empty tree, I am a rapping, flinging shutter. I am a yellowed volume turned by a claw hand. I am an organ played in an attic at midnight. I am a mask, a skull mask behind an oak tree on the last day of October. I am a poison apple bobbling in a water tub for child noses to bump at, for child teeth to snap . . . I am a black candle lighted before an inverted cross. I am a coffin lid, a sheet with eyes, a foot-step on a black stairwell. I am Dunsany and Machen and I am the Legend of Sleepy Hollow. I am The Monkey's Paw and I am The Phantom Rickshaw. I am the Cat and the Canary, The Gorilla, the Bat, I am the ghost of Hamlet's father on the castle wall.

All of these things am I. And now these last things will be burned. While I lived *they* still lived. While I moved and hated and existed, *they* still existed. I am *all* that remembers them. I am all of them that *still* goes on, and will *not* go on after tonight. Tonight, all of us, Poe and Bierce and Hamlet's father, we burn together. They will make a big heap of us and burn us like a bonfire, like things of Guy Fawkes' day, gasoline, torch-light, cries and all!

And what a wailing will we put up. The world will be clean of us, but in our going we shall say, oh what is the world like, clean of fear, where is the dark imagination from the dark time, the thrill and the anticipation, the suspense of old October, gone, never more to come again, flattened and smashed and burned by the rocket people, by the Incinerator people, destroyed and obliterated, to be replaced by doors that open and close and lights that go on or off without fear. If only you could remember how once *we* lived, what Hallowe'en was to us, and what Poe was, and how we gloried in the dark morbidities. One more drink, dear friends, of Amontillado, before the burning. All of this, all, exists but in one last brain on earth. A whole world dying tonight. One more drink, pray.

"Here we are," said McClure.

THE Incinerator was brightly lighted. There was quiet music nearby. McClure got out of the beetle, came around to the other side. He opened the door. Lantry simply lay there. The talking and the logical talking had slowly drained him of life. He was no more than wax now, with a small glow in his eyes. This future world, how the men *talked* to you, how logically they reasoned away your life. They wouldn't believe in him. The force of their disbelief froze him. He could not move his arms or his legs. He could only mumble senselessly, coldly, eyes flickering.

McClure and the two others helped him out of the car, put him in a golden box and rolled him on a roller table into the warm glowing interior of the building.

I am Edgar Allan Poe, I am Ambrose Bierce, I am Hallowe'en, I am a coffin, a shroud, a Monkey's Paw, a Phantom, a Vampire . . .

"Yes, yes," said McClure, quietly, over him. "I know. I know."

The table glided. The walls swung over him and by him, the music played. You are dead, you are logically dead.

I am Usher, I am the Maelstrom, I am the MS Found In A Bottle, I am the Pit and I am the Pendulum, I am the Telltale Heart, I am the Raven nevermore, nevermore.

"Yes," said McClure, as they walked softly. "I know."

"I am in the catacomb," cried Lantry.

"Yes, the catacomb," said the walking man over him.

"I am being chained to a wall, and there is no bottle of Amontillado here!" cried Lantry weakly, eyes closed.

"Yes," someone said.

There was movement. The flame door opened.

"Now someone is mortaring up the cell, closing me in!"

"Yes, I know." A whisper.

The golden box slid into the flame lock.

"I'm being walled in! A very good joke indeed! Let us be gone!" A wild scream and much laughter.

"We know, we understand . . ."

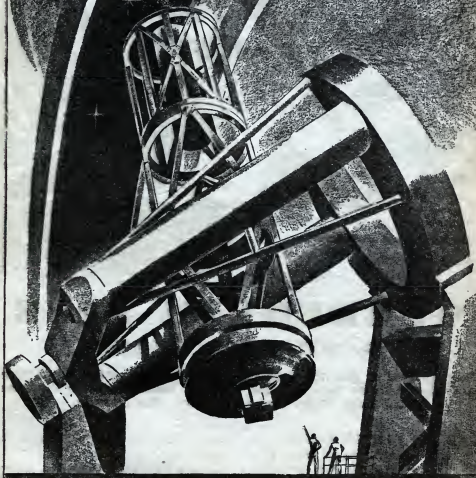
The inner flame lock opened. The golden coffin shot forth into flame.

"For the love of God, Montresor! For the love of God!"

BIG

EYE

THE NEW 200-INCH
TELESCOPE ON
MOUNT PALOMAR



...NOW, ON THIS, THE THIRD PLANET OF A MINOR STAR,
THERE OPENS A YET MORE GIANT EYE...A POOL, A BASIN
-TO CATCH MORE AND MORE THE FALLING SECRETS OF OUR
TERRIBLE, GLORIOUS COSMOS...FRIEND, HOW MANY OTHER
EYES, LIGHT-AGES AWAY, ARE OPENING...SWINGING OUR
WAY... STUDYING US?



Joe Berne went mad then.

Illustrated by MELINK

MURDERER'S BASE

By WILLIAM BRITTAIN

They played a ghastly game on that lonely asteroid. Killer and victim-to-be danced and feinted between space-beacon and ship. Only the stars knew the winner.

H E DID NOT REMEMBER exactly when the idea of killing Hervey occurred to him. Probably, though, it had been that day at Hermes Station, when the wrench had slipped from his grasp as he worked on the tower; it had drifted lightly down and struck Hervey a glancing blow on the helmet. They had laughed about it, and Hervey had said, "If we were under grav condi-

tions, Joe, that probably would have conked me."

It had been funny then, but it wasn't funny any more. Joe Berne watched Hervey all of the time—now, waiting. There had to be an opportunity, some day, some time. Accidents weren't frequent on the beacon service-run, but they did happen. And it had to look like an accident.

Berne knew that it wasn't going to be

easy. Sam Hervey was a careful, cautious man. He was a man who checked his equipment before he went through the air lock, who nursed his jets like they were infants, a man who had every intention of living a long life in a dirty business where the careless died young. Berne had been glad when Space Service had teamed him with Hervey; Personnel had clearly hoped that a tour of duty with the veteran Hervey would supply the balance and judgment that the younger man apparently lacked. It had worked out . . . Berne, Hervey and battered old Service Ship 114 had hung up an enviable record of efficiency and safety. And after their leave, Hervey had asked to work with Berne on another tour.

Hervey was good at this damned, dull, hateful task. Not many men were willing to spend nine months out of the year blasting from asteroid to asteroid, checking and servicing and reporting on the great beacons that beamed the dangerous spaceway from Mars to the moons of Jupiter. It was always tedious, often back-breaking and sometimes dangerous, and even Sam Hervey had said that he would be glad to be out of it.

That had been the start of it, three months before. The wheezing old SS-114 had burned out two of her ancient aft tubes on the run to Adonis Station, and Berne had eased her down on a jagged, unnamed chunk of black slag where they could jury-rig new lining. In between spells on the tube, they had looked over the tiny planetoid, and on one of their trips across the space-scarred waste their Cannon counters had begun to tick ominously. They had fled back to the ship; the rapidity of the signals warned them that volume of radioactivity was far greater than even their screened space-garb was designed to withstand.

Berne had rubbed his hands gleefully that day.

"It has to be a damned big deposit to set up radiation like that," he had chortled, and Sam Hervey, after due deliberation, had agreed with him. They had started to make their plans then; they would pool their funds, buy a small ship on Mars, rig it up with equipment, and work the deposit. Even if it weren't as big as they hoped, it would set them up for life.

"It won't be easy, Joe," Hervey had warned. "Even with everything we've got in the bank, plus what we can borrow, we can't swing the deal. If we sign up with the Service for another trip, the six thousand credits we'll bank from that will do it."

Berne had argued with that. He could see no point in another tour, another nine months in the lonely wastes. Maybe they could cut in on one of the big mining companies. Hervey had smiled at him commiseratingly.

"Let's look at the long haul, kid," he had said. "We cut in on one of the companies, and right away they've got a big slice of the deposit. We could even file for mining rights and then sell out—let someone else do the hard work. But if we do it ourselves we'll really be in the chips, and won't have to split with anyone."

He had looked around the cluttered cabin of the SS-114.

"Lord," he said slowly, "don't you think I'd like to get out of this, too? I've had enough of non-grav conditions, enough of breathing revamped oxygen. I don't like it any better than you do. But it's been a living. Another nine months of it, a couple of trips out to our strike—and then we retire."

Berne had thought about it so much that it was eating a hole in his brain. Hervey was figuring on two, maybe even three years before they were in a position to sell their mining rights to one of the big companies equipped to do a large-scale extraction job. By that time, Hervey had said, bidding for their rights would be so high they could afford to be choosy.

Maybe so, Joe thought, but he couldn't see it that way. He knew they could sell now and make enough to do what they wanted for the rest of their lives. Sure, they wouldn't make as much, but . . .

"The hell with the long haul," Joe Berne had said to himself. "I'm getting mine while I'm still young enough to enjoy it."

So he decided to kill Sam Hervey. With Hervey out of the way, Joe Berne would own the deposit. There would be no division of the take. The fact that Sam Hervey had been his friend did not even enter Joe Berne's mind.

MURDER in space is not easy. The Space Patrol is nosy about those things. Joe Berne knew that Sam Hervey's death had to appear accidental; as soon as Berne filed claim for mining rights, the SP would be extremely interested in the manner of his partner's death.

There was no question of disposing of the body—not in space. In the boiling heat of the Venusian jungles, perhaps, it would have been easy; there the bodies of earthlings rotted and were gone. But out here in the frigid void between Mars and Jupiter, the dead remain unchanged through eternity. Neither could Hervey's body be jettisoned in space; held by the attraction of the ship, it would slowly circle the SS-114 like a horrible toy on a string, a mute accusation against a murderer . . . Nor could the body be buried on an asteroid; Space Service demanded that its dead be brought home whenever humanly possible. Berne could not conceive of any circumstances that could arise in the Asteroid Belt that could adequately explain to the Service and the SP why Sam Hervey was not brought home.

SS-114 would have to land at Mars Terminal with her engineer still aboard, frozen solid in the hold, testifying to the accident that killed him . . .

The great beacon of Astarea Station pulsed steadily into the star-hung void. Sam Hervey finished his service check list and watched Joe Berne scribbling furiously at his desk, his powerful shoulders hunched over the paper. Berne looked up and found his partner's pale blue eyes on him, saw the amusement in the space-burned, homely face.

"Don't you ever get tired of figuring how you're going to spend your money?" Hervey asked. He pushed away the dinner plates and relaxed in his seat. He belched quietly, tamped tobacco in his old pipe, and blew a reflective cloud of blue smoke at Berne. Berne felt a flash of annoyance.

"No," he said, shortly. "I've been poor too long. There are so many things I want, I don't even know where to start."

"A new-model helicopter, most likely," Hervey said easily. "You want a red one or a yellow one? And a permanent membership at one of the sexier pleasure domes at Luna City, complete with blonde, maybe?"

Hervey was making fun of him. Berne felt his fists clench and the muscles bunch in his shoulders. Watch it, he told himself.

"Maybe," he replied. "Why not?"

The old man chuckled, watching Berne's dark, flushed face through the smoke.

"A fool and his money . . ." he quoted. "You're no fool, Joe, but you're apt to be careless. Like the other day, when I asked you to check the oxygen supply on the suits."

"I forgot," Berne said sullenly. "Anyone can forget."

"Not out here," Hervey said sharply. "There ain't many second chances in space."

BERNE looked at the older man, and wondered if he were getting suspicious. He had not forgotten to check the oxygen supply before they stepped through the air locks at Adonis Station. He had made very certain that Hervey's suit tanks had been almost empty. But just before they left the ship, Sam Hervey had paused, checked all of his equipment, and of course had discovered from the indicator dials on his suit control box that his tanks were low. Hervey had said little—just another lecture on being careful in space—but perhaps he had started to think about it, had remembered that he himself had filled the tanks a few days before . . .

It was time to play smart.

"I know," the big man apologized humbly. "I'm sorry, Sam. Sometimes I think I'll never learn. If it weren't for you . . ."

Sam Hervey smiled. "You'll learn," he said. "You're learning all the time. Make a spaceman yet, before I'm through with you. But you sure were a wild one when they teamed you up with me. You just needed a little seasoning."

Who in hell wants to be a spaceman, Berne thought. To hell with that, and with this busybody of an old maid and his superior airs. He yawned.

"I'm going to hit the sack," he announced.

Hervey nodded. "I'm with you," he said. "We finish here tomorrow, soon's we run a check on power output. And then the run to Hermes Station."

He stretched. "Guess I'm getting old, Joe. I need my sleep before I strap down

for blast-off. Seems like those G's hit me a lot harder than they used to." He looked admiringly at the bulk and muscles of his younger partner. "Now you're built to take acceleration. Me, I'm not—too skinny and too old."

Hervey unstrapped himself from his chair and drifted toward his bunk, pulling himself along by the handgrips.

"Be nice, someday," he uttered, "to walk to bed and go to sleep without locking myself in. And that reminds me . . ."

Berne looked up. "Yeah?"

"Joe, make sure you check the acceleration harnesses before we blast off tomorrow. I felt a little give in mine last time. I don't aim to get shoved clear through my own firing chamber bulkhead one of these days."

"Sure, Sam."

Berne had felt the give in his own harness, he remembered. The ship was getting old; she needed to be refitted before her next trip out. Like those harnesses, for instance. The strain against them was terrific . . . That is when it burst on him, flooding his mind with its perfection and simplicity. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

"Going to the john," he told Hervey. He guided himself out of the cabin and into the pressurized tunnel leading aft, closing the door behind him.

It would be so easy. In a little two-man ship like the SS-114, the engineer lay prone in his power control station aft, cushioned in his webbed harness against the awful shattering thrust of acceleration. A weakened harness, or an improperly secured one—and a man would hurtle screaming into the jungle of gears and control levers and junction boxes that studded the bulkhead of the firing chamber. He would smash against that unyielding metal and be broken like a child's toy . . .

Oh, it was simple, but not quite that simple, not with a man like Sam Hervey. Even if he trusted Joe Berne completely, Sam Hervey would check his own harness, just to make sure; it was the habit of a lifetime in space. And especially after the oxygen-tank incident. But there was another way, a better way. In the dim light of the tunnel, Joe Berne kneeled beside one of the tool lockers. He found what he

wanted, and his big hand closed reassuringly around the handle of a heavy wrench. He closed the locker door softly, thrust the wrench into the bellyband of his dungarees, and drifted back to the cabin.

One smashing blow, and it would be over. Then he would work on the harness, weakening it further, and before blast-off he would cradle Sam Hervey's corpse in the webbing. The thrust, the unresisting corpse straining at the harness—then release and the dead thing smashing against the bulkhead . . . No wounds, no injuries on the battered thing that could not be explained by the crash into the tangled gears. It had happened in space before; it would happen again.

SAM HERVEY was already strapped down when he returned, but he was still awake, watching Berne. Now? Berne decided to wait until Hervey was asleep. He kept his back toward the other bunk as he groped along the handrail toward his own sack; no need of letting Hervey see that bulge in his middle . . . Swiftly he thrust it under the blanket, stripped, turned off the light and strapped down. In the darkness he heard Hervey's soft, "Night, Joe."

"Good night, Sam." He grinned into the darkness, his fingers wrapped around the wrench, waiting.

It was not a long wait. The breathing across the cabin settled down, became deep, regular. The momentary tossing ceased. The cabin was quiet. Slowly, carefully, Joe Berne unsnapped his bunk harness. For once he was thankful for non-grav condition. He did not have to touch the floor until the last moment, when he would need solid footing when he swung the wrench . . .

Gently he drifted across the cabin, his left hand lightly touching the handrail, pushing along. He held his breath. Another few feet . . . He lifted the wrench, straining to see in the darkness.

Sam Hervey moved swiftly. His lean wiry body twisted on the narrow bunk, the harness was thrown off—how had he gotten free so quickly?—and he was away, sobbing through his teeth, clawing at the bigger man. Joe Berne gasped in shock, falling back from the fury of the sudden assault. A hard fist crashed into his belly,

and he cursed and swung the wrench. He cut air, and Hervey was scrambling away from him. The cabin door was jerked open, and in the dim tunnel light Berne saw his quarry plunging away, a shocked white face staring back over his shoulder. Cursing, Berne hurled the wrench. It was futile, of course. It drifted slowly away from his hand and crashed against the slammed steel door.

Berne was trembling with rage; waves of sick nausea gripped him. His dismal failure writhed in his stomach, and he cursed again as he groped from the cabin. Hervey had turned off the tunnel light; in the darkness ahead of him, Berne heard Hervey scrambling along the handrails, and then a clatter as something fell.

He plunged toward the sound, taking great leaps, using the power of his legs against the floor to hurl himself forward. He did not see the trap that Hervey had laid, the tangle of armored cable that Hervey had ripped from a locker and hurled into the narrow tunnel behind him. Berne smashed the cable, screaming obscenities at Hervey, and fought to free himself from the twisted mass.

Hervey had bought time with the cabin door slammed in Berne's face, with the cable hurled from the locker into the tunnel. As Berne freed himself and leaped forward again, he heard the *woosh* of escaping air as the inner air lock door was opened. Then the clang of the lock door echoed through the ship. Hervey was safe, for awhile.

But he couldn't go far. Sobbing, mouth-ing curses, sick with anger, Berne struggled into space garb and opened the gun-rack beside the lock. He saw with satisfaction that the fleeing Hervey had not waited to arm himself. Berne plunged through the lock.

THE great banded face of mighty Jupiter seemed to fill the whole sky, lowering down on the jagged black waste of the asteroid. Five hundred yards from the ship the gray metal dome of Astarea Station huddled forlornly at the base of the soaring beacon tower. In the cold half-light, Berne saw the bulky space-suited figure of Sam Hervey running toward the station.

Berne kneeled at the top of the ladder,

took careful aim, and squeezed the switch of the heavy rifle. The rocket flame lanced out. Just behind the fleeing figure, and to the side, the rocket mushroomed in a brief blinding flare. Berne could see the glint of the face-plate as Hervey turned his head. He fired again, and cursed the weak light as he overshot. The running figure wavered, looked back, started again toward the safety of the station air lock—toward the radio that could call Mars Base, that could tell the story of murder . . .

The range was too great. He missed again, but Hervey turned away. Silhouetted against the circle of the station air lock, he made a good target—but running amid the nightmare shapes of the black rocks, Berne could barely see him.

Hervey realized that he would not be able to make it into the safety of the station. He swerved away, leaping high with each huge step, and sped into the wild darkness. Berne leaped down the ladder and ran toward the station, peering into the half-light, finger on the switch. Then he saw him, sitting calmly on an outcropping, watching. Berne switched on his communicator.

"You can't get away, Sam," he said.

The answer came back, thin in the ear-phones.

"I'm going to try, Joe," Hervey said. "Have you gone out of your mind?"

Berne laughed into the throat mike. "No," he said. "I'm sane, Sam. I just decided that I wasn't going to split the money with you, Sam. Or wait three years to get it, either."

He heard the other's soft, "Oh." Hervey got up and moved away from the outcropping, looking back. Berne took up a position about midway between the ship and the station, watching him. Hervey was finished, he told himself; it was just a matter of time . . . Berne could cover both havens.

He was so sure of victory that when he heard Sam Hervey starting to laugh, he was genuinely shocked, and he was a little afraid. What . . . ?

"Joe?" The voice was in his ears.

"Yeah, Sam."

"You wouldn't want to blast an old friend, would you, Joe?"

"It would be a pleasure, Sam."

The laugh sounded again. "Now, Joe, you're not using your head. Always careless, that's you, Joe. What would the Space Patrol say when they find me full of rocket fragments? Might be a little tough on you, Joe."

Joe Berne gasped, and then the truth swept over him. Ye Gods, he thought, what a fool I am! I almost got him, almost brought him down with the projector. The heavy weapon slipped from his nerveless fingers. He sat down heavily on a rock, staring bitterly into the dimness.

"You can't stay out there forever, Sam," Berne said dully. "Maybe I can't kill you with a rocket, but I can kill you with something else."

"I know I can't fight you," Hervey said reasonably. "You're bigger and you're stronger. But you've got to catch me, Joe—and I can run faster than you ever could, you big dumb ox."

Berne shook his head. Everything was wrong. What had happened?

"You can't stay out there forever, Sam," he repeated.

The chuckle came again, thin and ghostly in the earphones. "No," Hervey said. "But Joe—neither can you!"

What did Hervey mean? Berne looked back at the ship, then at the dull metallic dome of Astarea Station.

And then it came to him, what Sam Hervey had tried to say.

HE, JOE BERNÉ, did not dare return to the ship so long as Sam Hervey lived, for then Hervey could make a dash for the safety of the station. Nor did Berne dare go to the station, for that would leave the ship unprotected. If Berne went to either place, Hervey could easily reach the air lock of the other refuge, slip through, dog down the doors and sit it out, waiting for the Space Patrol to come.

"Stalemate, Joe," Sam Hervey said softly. "It's your move."

Berne went berserk then. Howling with rage, he picked up a rock and hurled it toward the voice. Cursing, he plunged into the tortured rocks, seeking out his tormentor.

"I'll kill you," he sobbed. "I'll kill you!"

Sam Hervey did not hesitate. Bracing himself, he shot away. For half an hour

Berne followed him, panting, raging, almost mad with rage. They leaped and turned and twisted, two crazy little running figures under the cold Jupiter-light, gasping in the thin trickle of air from their suit flasks, blood pounding in their brains. And always Hervey circled away, trying to get between Berne and the ship, between Berne and the station, between Berne and the things that the big man had always wanted, the riches and comfort for which he had been prepared to murder . . .

And then the wild dash was over, and Berne sprawled gasping beneath a black rock finger and glared at the awkward space-garbed figure that watched him so placidly from another rock five hundred yards away.

"We use up a lot of oxygen that way, Joe," Hervey said quietly. Berne cursed, looked swiftly at his indicator. No, the tanks had been full. They had three days' supply. But . . . when that was gone? Could he calmly return to the ship or to the station storage locker and recharge his tanks? No. Oh, Lord, no! In that brief interval, Hervey would gain the refuge he sought, the refuge that meant the end of Joe Berne.

Berne got up and started to walk back toward the ship. He turned once; Hervey was following him, keeping his distance, but following. Berne spun, made a move toward him. Hervey darted away, and his chuckle was in the earphones. Hervey paused, waited.

"Tag, Joe," Hervey said. "Who's It? Do you know?"

Berne did not answer. He angled toward the ship, watching over his shoulder. Suddenly Sam Hervey dashed off toward the station. Berne shouted, raced towards him. Hervey retreated to safety. When Berne turned toward the station, Hervey started for the ship. Berne drove him back.

"This is fun, Joe," Hervey said. He was circling warily, drifting closer and closer toward the ship this time. Again the big man charged, again Hervey retreated, waited. When Berne finally reached his post squarely between the ship and the station, where he had dropped the rifle, Hervey was still five hundred yards away, but he was closer to the ship than he had been.

"You can't make it to the ship," Berne warned him. "I'll be on you before you get the lock closed."

"I know," Hervey agreed soberly. "I wouldn't like that at all, Joe."

"No," Berne said. "You wouldn't."

Stalemate. The two men sat on the black, seared rocks and watched each other, and the hours crawled. Twice Berne got up and chased Hervey away, into the outer darkness. It was useless.

"You got yourself in a fine mess, boy," Hervey said. "You should learn not to be so careless."

"Shut up," Berne gritted.

"I figured that business of the oxygen tanks was funny," Hervey went on. "Made me sort of stop and think, Joe. Then I knew what you were up to. And when I mentioned the harness, back there in the cabin, you didn't remember to hide your face. I had sort of a hunch that you might try something tonight."

"You weren't strapped down," Berne's voice was sulkily accusing.

"No," Hervey agreed blithely. "I wasn't. When you went out to the tunnel to get your wrench, I unstrapped. I was holding on to the bunk with both hands, waiting for you to make up your stupid mind."

"Shut up," Berne said. "Shut up!" His voice raised to a scream, deafening him in his helmet. "I'm going to break you to pieces."

"Not yet, you ain't," rejoined the mocking voice. "And you forgot something else, too, I'll bet."

"What?"

"The daily radio report to Base, Joe. Remember?" The voice faded, chuckling grimly.

For a moment Berne felt panic gripping at him, swinging him wildly through space. He was dizzy with it. The daily report! If SS-114 did not come through, Base would start wondering.

"Forget it," he said. "They won't worry for awhile. Maybe reception is bad."

"Sure," the other agreed readily. "For a little while, Joe. But if forty-eight hours pass and they don't hear from us, you know damned well they'll have a cruiser out here fast, investigating. The Service likes us, Joe. They don't want to lose us."

Berne knew that what Hervey said was true.

"You'll be dead by then," he assured Hervey.

The soft, hated laugh echoed in his helmet. "Will I, Joe?"

THE HOURS crept by, and the dim light waxed and waned as the planetoid spun in the void. Like clumsy fat robots, like puppets on a puppet master's strings, the two figures advanced, retreated, circled, attacked and fled. They danced their macabre minuet among the twisted, tortured black rocks, and always the soft, mocking laugh was in his earphones as Berne lunged panting after the darting puppet ahead of him. And finally he sank down at his post, breathing in sobbing gasps and tasting the salt of the bitter tears that trickled down his cheeks. The oxygen was sinking; not much more. At the rate they were using it, it would not last much longer.

"Hervey!"

The other stirred in the shadow of a rock pinnacle.

"I'm still with you, Joe."

"Okay, Sam," Berne said. "I've had enough. Come on in."

There was silence, then, from far away, the ghost of a chuckle.

"Don't you want to play any more, Joe?"

Berne snarled, then with an effort regained control of himself.

"No," he said. "We're killing each other. Come on in, Sam. I won't hurt you. I promise."

"Thanks, Joe," Hervey said. "But I don't think I trust you any more. Tell you what. You go on back to the ship, and I'll go to the station. Or vice-versa. Any way you want. But I don't think I want to be in the same place with you."

"You'd call Base," Berne said pettishly.

"Oh, certainly," Hervey answered. "We'd have to report, wouldn't we? And I'd have to tell them that you didn't like me any more, wouldn't I?"

For a moment Berne thought desperately of taking a chance, of letting Hervey into the station, and then trying to brazen it out, of accusing Hervey of being the one who had wanted to murder . . . His shoulders sagged. It wasn't any good. He knew that they would believe Hervey—Hervey with his reputation, careful, re-

liable old Sam Hervey . . . It was almost over.

"Damn you," he said. He heard Hervey laugh again.

It went on forever, Berne thought. The little robot figures went on with their dance, they advanced and fled, circled and quartered. His eyelids drooped, his head fell forward in the helmet. With a jerk he pulled himself into wakefulness. Hervey was moving like a shot, racing for the ladder of the ship. Screaming, Berne hurtled toward him. Hervey saw him, wavered while he gauged the distance, and knew that he could not make it. He leaped away. It was close. Berne almost caught him. When the big man finally halted, choking for breath, Hervey was barely a hundred yards away. It might as well have been a mile. Curiously shrunk upon himself, Berne turned and went heavily back to his post. Hervey waited until he sat down, then drifted back a little and sat down beside a rock, watching.

Joe Berne slumped down, waiting for a move. He was starting to gasp for air now, and he was staring hungrily at the inviting open air locks of the ship and of Astartea Station. His head was hurting him, and his eyes were not focussing properly.

Twice he thought he saw Hervey get up and start toward the ship, and both times he struggled to his feet and dashed after him. Both times he had been wrong; Hervey had not moved. Berne shook his aching head. Was he beginning to imagine things? Maybe . . . maybe Hervey was dead. He moved toward the fat bulbous bulk that was Hervey. Hervey got up and walked away, looking back. He wasn't dead, then. He was waiting out there in the Jupiter-light for Joe Berne to die.

"You'll die, too!" he screamed into his mike. "You'll die, too!"

The voice that came back was weak, tired, and he realized that his own voice had been choked and almost strangled. The sweat was streaming down his face, mingling with the tears, wet inside his suit. His feet were like lead.

"Yes," the voice said. "I'll die, too, Joe. But will that do you any good? There are no uranium strikes where you're going, Joe—no nothing, Joe, unless you get oxygen quick."

HE COULDN'T, he sobbed to himself. He couldn't go through that inviting lock to the big tanks that held the precious gas. How long? Five minutes, anyhow, maybe more, maybe a little less. But more than enough time for Sam Hervey to reach safety, to lock the air locks, to start his message winging into the sky on its way to the waiting ears at Mars Terminal . . .

The weird mad light was crazy with moving space-suited figures, laughing at him, mocking him, and they all wore the ugly space-burned face of Sam Hervey. He lurched to his feet and shook his fist at them. He picked up the projector and worked the switch until the rocks were splashed with the flame of bursting rockets. He laughed and cursed and gibbered at the figures, and then understood that there had not been any figures, that Sam Hervey was still beneath the same rock, where he had been for hours, watching him.

He had to control himself, he thought shakily. Every time he lost control, he wasted oxygen, precious beautiful oxygen; his laboring lungs screamed for it. He knew that Hervey was remaining calm, was conserving oxygen. And he knew that the smaller, lighter man would probably not consume as much oxygen as he did, even at rest; there would be little difference, but in the long haul . . . That again! Sam Hervey's long haul, that he was always talking about!

"I've got to be calm," he said aloud. "Be calm! Never was calm before. Got to be now!"

Shut up, he told himself. Don't waste breath. He started to weep again, and the dimness was shot with colored lights. In his mouth his tongue was swelling, it was thick and pushing against his teeth. A sip of water from his canteen tube did not help, the tongue remained swollen. He was falling, and he heard the sound of his own retching gasps. Clumsily he fumbled at the intake valve, felt the cool breath of the oxygen, felt the new life trickling through the tube, the pressure almost gone. He sucked at it, swallowing, moaning, great tearing sobs ripping from his chest. The colored lights faded and went away, and he saw Sam Hervey moving slowly toward the ship. Another few seconds . . .!

Screaming, he leaped at Hervey, his

arms flailing wildly, his fingers curled into claws, hating, wanting to rend and kill. He fell heavily, sprawling on his chest, staggered to his feet and ran on. Hervey watched him, then drifted away. Hervey was staggering, too, having difficulty in controlling the long gravityless leaps, but he did not fall. He went away and sat down and watched Joe Berne with great interest, and through the earphones Berne heard the faint mocking chuckle of his enemy.

Joe Berne went mad then. He had been a little mad for hours; perhaps he had been mad since that first crazy chase across the nightmare landscape. He twisted his intake valve all the way and laughed and howled and capered gleefully as the oxygen flooded into his starved heaving lungs. He leaped in the star-hung dimness and shrieked at the banded face of Jupiter in the sky. He gibbered, and he picked up the heavy gun and hurled it at Sam Hervey, and then he laughed with pleasure as it floated away and fell lightly to the rocks.

HE WAS still laughing when the intake valve bubbled and hissed and was silent, and there was no more oxygen. Slowly he turned away, staggering heavily toward the ship, toward the oxygen tanks. The colored lights had been turned on again. A great hammer was crashing against his brain. Someone was pushing his eyeballs out of their sockets; someone had strong fingers locked tight around his throat. He choked and tore at his throat with his own hands. He fell, face downward, and tried to crawl, and in his chest he could hear the sucking and rattling.

Berne was conscious of Sam Hervey standing over him, blotting out the pale cold light of the great planet above. He was conscious of the face peering through the plate into his own darkening features. He tried to reach out, to grasp Hervey, to drag him down into the pain-streaked night with him, but his arms would not move. Through the lightning-shot darkness he heard that soft mocking voice.

"Good night, Joe," Sam Hervey said. "You always were careless."

AND IT'S A JOB FOR ALL OF US

Let's Do It Together

Let's Help Mr. & Mrs. U.S.A. (140,000,000 of us)

Live Together • Work Together • Strive Together

To Build A Great and Happy Nation

IN A WORLD OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

• *American Brotherhood* •
FOR JUSTICE, AMITY, UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION
AMONG PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS AND JEWS



The evacuation was successful.

DAY OF WRATH

By Bjarne Kirchoff

The men of the Norgan System had a tough decision to make concerning the planet in A93. Yet there was no hesitation. Can you blame them?

FROWNING THOUGHTFULLY, Lan Yotar pushed a button on his desk and waited till the television screen above it glowed, showing the respectful face of an attendant.

"Ask Tir Latoka to come here immediately, please," said the Chief of the Council of Elders.

"I hear and obey," came the routine reply, and the attendant's face vanished from the screen.

Leaning back in his chair, Lan Yotar gazed somberly at the report in his hand, till the Chief Scientist's voice recalled him to his surroundings.

"You sent for me, Excellency?"

"Yes, I did, Tir Latoka. Sit down."

As the Chief Scientist seated himself on the opposite side of the desk, he continued

"I am a little uneasy about the latest report on Rona."

Involuntarily, the Chief Scientist turned to look at the Wall of the Planets, Lan Yotar's eyes following his.

The Wall of the Planets was so called because it pictured that solar system known to its inhabitants as the Confederated Planets of Norga. One entire wall of the Council Chamber in the Hall of the Rulers was constructed of slabs of lapis lazuli, so cunningly joined that they presented the appearance of an unbroken whole. In the center shone a huge disc of gold, representing Norga, the sun of the Norgan solar system. Grouped around it at the proper intervals were other discs symbolic of the system's eleven planets. Yula, the planet nearest Norga, was a solid circle of onyx,

the black color indicating mystery, as it was too close to their sun to permit exploration; Heta, consisting mostly of water, was a disc of shimmering silver; Mira, from which the system derived most of its minerals, was cleverly worked in seven different metals, while the remaining planets were also fashioned to symbolize their main features.

But it was the disc representing Rona that held their eyes. A single piece of pale green jade, marked with little squares of emeralds for the cultivated fields and small circles of sapphires for the freshwater lakes.

"An appropriate color for the planet that supplies over half the system's food," murmured Lan Yotar. "The latest jest is that the Ronans are afraid of turning over in bed for fear of crushing a vegetable!"

"I doubt if there's a square inch of available soil not under cultivation," assented Tir Latoka. "It is not for nothing Rona is known as 'The Food Planet'."

"Which brings us back to this report," continued the Chief. "Tell me, do you consider Nol Kosar an alarmist?"

"Far from it, Excellency," was the ready reply. "He is very clear-headed and reliable, which is why I picked him as Scientist of our most important planet. I added no comments to his report before passing it on to you, as I considered none necessary."

"Hmmmm!" The Chief gazed reflectively at the report, reading parts of it aloud. "Interior heat definitely increasing—underground caverns possibly collapsed, letting inflammable gases into molten core—possible now to grow tropical fruits in temperate zones—seismologists report faint tremors—"

Tossing the report aside, Lan Yotar abruptly asked the question Tir Latoka had been anticipating: "What have you advised him to do?"

"The ancient steam-boiler was equipped with a safety valve to prevent it exploding from too great internal pressure," replied the Chief Scientist. "I advised Nol Kosar to suggest to the Ruler that a vent be bored in the crater of the extinct volcano near Sadri. It is the least fruitful part of Rona, and precautions can be taken to prevent the possible flow of—"

He was cut short by a hideous noise. There was a set of loudspeakers on the

etheradio cabinet by the Chief's desk and it was from one of these, colored a significant red for danger, that the harsh wailing was emanating.

The two men exchanged startled looks and their lips moved. Neither could hear what the other was saying, but their words were identical:

"The Emergency Call!"

THE Emergency Call had been instituted over two thousand years ago, after a disastrous invasion of the system by beings from some unknown part of space. Installed in all important etheradio stations, it was to be used only in cases of extreme urgency, and at its call all government officials were to drop everything and repair to the nearest etheradio for instructions. In the two thousand years it had been in effect it had sounded only three times, apart from the regular tests: once when a giant meteor had threatened the system with destruction, once when the unknown invaders had attempted a second attack, and once when miners on Mira had drilled into an inner world inhabited by creatures with hypnotic powers that threatened to enslave the planet.

The harsh wailing rose to an earsplitting crescendo, then died away, leaving them listening tensely for the announcement. It came, shorn of the customary formal modes of speech used in official reports:

"Set Gori, Ruler of Rona, here! Three volcanic eruptions on Rona! Violent earthquakes in other regions! Entire planet threatened with destruction! Am evacuating all people we have room for in our space-ships! Send help immediately! Over."

There was hardly a pause before the Chief of the Council of Elders began issuing orders: "Lan Yotar here! Set Gori, concentrate the rest of your people in the nearest cities. Ros Vinla, are you listening?"

"Here!" came the voice of the Commander of the Norgan Spacefleet.

"Rush the fleet to Rona and evacuate all people. Over!"

"All Leaders of Spacefleet Squadrons, listen: Squadron I, proceed to Center City; Squadron II, proceed to Forel; Squadron III—"

Lan Yotar snapped off the etheradio and rose. "That's all we can do here. Come!"

Followed by the Chief Scientist, he hastened out of the Council Chamber and down the broad corridor. Descending the steps to the landing field, he was just in time to see his private spacecar swoop down in its allotted place. His pilot had heard the Emergency Call and knew he would be needed. Another spacecar landed close by and Var Dalum, the Chief Scribe, hastily joined them.

"You're going to Rona?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes. Come with us," said the Council Chief.

The airlock had hardly settled in its socket before the pilot took off and the little craft zoomed up at a steep slant. The blue sky gradually darkened and soon they were in the dead black of interplanetary space, heading straight for the afflicted planet.

"Rona, of all planets!" whispered the Chief Scribe. "What shall we do for food?"

The Chief Scientist shook his head. "Let's not despair till we know the worst," he replied.

After that, silence reigned. The pilot concentrated on getting every ounce of power out of his jets. Lan Yotar sat staring straight ahead, his lips compressed, his arms folded. The two other officials gazed through the transparent sidepanels, now and again sliding the telescopic lenses into them to observe a Squadron of the Spacefleet hastening towards their common destination.

"Surely we should see Rona by now," murmured Var Dalum.

"We should," assented Tir Latoka grimly. "And since there's obviously such a pall of smoke over it that we can't, the situation doesn't look any too good."

The etheradio had been silent, as it was a strict rule that only highly necessary messages be broadcast during an emergency. It now gave voice, unconsciously confirming the Chief Scientist's words.

"Ros Vinla here! All incoming Squadrons exercise extreme care in landing; visibility practically nil, owing to smoke. Alter your course to nearest clear space and come in under smoke. Squadron IV, join Squadron VII; your objective has been destroyed. That is all."

"There's Sita," remarked the pilot, nam-

ing one of Rona's three moons. "Once we pass her—"

In a few moments the spacecar had passed the satellite, and an involuntary groan burst from them all. The planet was a horror. Mile upon square mile, formerly consisting of green fields and bulging granaries, was now a seething mass of molten lava; lakes were rapidly disappearing in clouds of superheated steam. Over all hovered dense masses of black smoke and volcanic ash, blowing aside now and then to reveal the terrible scene beneath.

"Hold it here, pilot," instructed the Chief, then spoke into the etheradio. "Lan Yotar here! My spacecar will stay by Sita till further notice. The Chief Scientist and Chief Scribe are with me. Communicate only when urgent. Ros Vinla, report to me when evacuation is accomplished. That is all."

"I hear and obey," answered Ros Vinla.

For hours that seemed years, the four men sat watching the scene of destruction through the telescopic lenses. Below them, spaceships of every size and description plunged into the chaos and rose again with survivors, hastening to land them on Mira, which was nearest, and returning to pick up more unfortunates from such parts of Rona as were not yet covered with lava or engulfed by earthquakes. Orderly Squadrons of the Spacefleet arrived from their respective planets, landed at their objectives, and took off with full loads of frantic Ronans. Freighters and private craft, including spacecars no larger than the Chief's, moved here and there, singly and in groups, darting in when they saw a chance and saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

Finally Ros Vinla's voice sounded again, and by the fact that he had reverted to official phraseology, all knew that the emergency had passed:

"Greeting from Ros Vinla, Commander of the Norgan Spacefleet, to Lan Yotar, Chief of the Council of Elders. Peace be with you. Evacuation accomplished. That is all."

FOR a day and a half the full government of the Confederated Planets of Norga had sat in an Emergency Session. Decision after decision, concerning the welfare and temporary disposal of the Ronans

had been proposed, voted on and passed or amended.

At last they could concentrate on the problem that had been constantly in their minds since Rona had turned from a green and smiling planet to a hideous mass of glowing lava. Appropriately enough, it was Set Gori, the elected Ruler of Rona, who first brought it up for official debate. A tall and handsome figure, still wearing bandages over the burns sustained when he insisted on remaining at his post to the last, he rose and was granted permission to speak.

"Elders and Rulers," he said. "As we all know, Rona supplied 56% of the food needed by our system. Rona is destroyed. What shall we do for food?"

He sat down abruptly, whereon the Chief Scientist rose and, at a nod of assent from the Chief Scribe, replied.

"Our unfortunate friend from Rona has put the matter in a nutshell. I will answer as briefly: I have spent all day yesterday in conference with my brother scientists, and we all agree there is only one solution. As the Norgan solar system cannot supply sufficient food for its inhabitants, we must look outside the system for a source of supply.

"I move an expedition be sent into space to find an available planet suitable for our purpose."

"I second the motion," said the Chief Astronomer.

"In favor—?" came the Chief's deep voice.

A forest of hands shot up.

"Carried unanimously!"

The eleven members of the Council of Elders and the Chief Scribe conferred briefly, whereafter the Chief Scribe spoke into a recorder. When he was through, a junior Scribe took the plastic ribbon from the machine and inserted it in a loud-speaker, that the governing body might hear and approve the details before it was made law:

"Decision 14 of the Council of Elders, given on the second day of the Emergency Session, Year 3749 since the Confederation of the Planets of Norga.

"Let this be known as our Decision:

"That a suitable spaceship be constructed for the purpose of exploring such solar systems as are within reasonable range,

and that it be equipped with all the scientific instruments necessary for that purpose.

"That Ros Vinla, Commander of the Spacefleet of Norga, be in command of this expedition and duly authorized to pick his own crew of scientists, navigators, technicians, scouts or any other persons he deems necessary to the fulfilment of his mission.

"That his mission shall be to find and report on any planets that might be suitable for either or both of the following purposes: firstly, to supply us with food; secondly, to provide living space for our surplus population. He will, of course, bear in mind that the rights of the inhabitants of these planets must be fully respected, means of communication must be found and friendly relations established. He will send daily reports by etheradio to the Chief Scribe.

"The Commander will in all cases await the sanction of the Council of Elders before taking any decisive steps, save in cases of extreme emergency, such as a surprise attack by hostile natives."

"Commander Ros Vinla, you have heard the Council's Decision?"

In the section reserved for the high officials of the government, a tall, spare man in early middle-age rose to his feet. He wore the dark blue undress uniform of the Norgan Spacefleet, his rank indicated by a golden sun and circle on the chest.

"I hear and obey," he replied, in a dry, precise voice.

IN THE Chief Scribe's office, Lan Yotar paced restlessly to and fro, watched sympathetically by Var Dalum.

"Why not sit down and relax, Lan Yotar?" he suggested mildly. "A glass of wine?"

With a sigh the Chief of the Council of Elders sank into a padded chair. "Thank you," he answered. "This tension is rather hard on me. I suppose I am getting old," he added wistfully.

"You are only a hundred and eighty-six," smiled the Chief Scribe. "That might have been considered old five or six generations ago, but our life expectancy is increasing so rapidly I think you can safely count on another century, at least."

Lan Yotar paid but scant attention to

the comforting words, his thoughts far away in space. "Isn't it soon time for the Commander's daily report?" he asked. "If System A93 contains no suitable planets—" He stopped with a sigh.

"Yes, I know," murmured Var Dalum. "I newscasted a resume of the whole situation this morning, so the people will be prepared if the Commander's report to-night is negative."

"I didn't hear it. Will you read it to me?"

Pulling a tablet from a rack, the Chief Scribe commenced reading.

"It is now almost four years since Commander Ros Vinla set out to discover a planet or planets in some other solar system that would relieve the food shortage and lack of living space now prevailing here.

"In that time the spaceship 'Norga II' has visited eleven solar systems and reported on one hundred and thirty-nine planets. Of the latter, one hundred and three are uninhabited and unsuitable for colonization; nineteen can be made suitable and we have already dispatched colonists to twelve of them. It will, however, be several years before they can produce food to any practical amount. Of the remaining seventeen, nine are inhabited by beings in a primitive stage of development, who are at present hostile; we are endeavoring to establish friendly relations with them, but, owing to their low mentality, progress will doubtless be slow. The remaining eight are inhabited by beings similar to us and friendly relations have been established. Unfortunately, they have very little living space and food to spare; certainly not enough to be of any practical help to us at present.

"Ten days ago the 'Norga II' entered the solar system marked on your space-charts as System A93. This consists of a sun and nine planets. Only three of these are inhabited. One of these is a dying planet, arid and thin-aired, and it can barely support its own rapidly diminishing population. The second is too watery to support any life except the amphibious creatures native to it. The third is the one Commander Ros Vinla will report on to-night.

"It is with regret I warn you that, should this planet prove unsuitable for our

purpose, the 'Norga II' will have to return to Norga immediately. The Commander has informed me he has barely sufficient supplies to last him the return trip. After that, time must be spent outfitting the expedition for another trip, time we can ill afford. Furthermore, this expedition having covered all space nearest Norga, the second trip will require much more time to reach unexplored space and will also be unable to cover so large a territory. We can only hope and pray that his next and final report will be one of success."



VAR DALUM replaced the tablet in the rack and for a while neither spoke. Finally Lan Yotar broke the silence.

"We have already started preparations for his next trip," he said. "New space-charts of the—"

A shrill buzzing interrupted him and a green light flashed on the intercommunicator. Val Darum sprang up and pressed a button. "Val Darum here."

"Commander Ros Vinla reporting," came the voice of the etheradio operator on duty.

"Switch him through," directed the Chief Scribe eagerly.

The Commander's voice came over the set. "Greeting from Ros Vinla, Commander of the Norgan Spacefleet, to Val Darum, Chief Scribe of the Rulers of Norga," he began formally. "Peace be with you. Will you arrange to have the Elders listen to this report, as my next action calls for their sanction."

LAN YOTAR leaned forward and pressed the button that switched the Commander through to the various members of the Council of Elders, all of whom were waiting beside their etheradio sets in their homes.

"Greeting from Lan Yotar, Chief of the Council of Elders, to Ros Vinla, Commander of the Norgan Spacefleet," he said. "Peace be with you. Communication has been established as you requested. Proceed."

"Report on Planet No. 3 of System A93," continued the Commander. "This planet is almost an exact replica of the Planet Rona in our own system. It is slightly larger, but the air, water, vegetation, gravity even the domestic animals, are similar to those of Rona. The human beings inhabiting this planet are exact counterparts of ourselves—physically. Mentally, they differ vastly.

"As usual, I sent one scout to make a preliminary survey. He returned with a tale so shocking and unbelievable that I sent two other scouts to check his statements. I took the added precaution of issuing them rayguns, as they would probably have been attacked by these insensate killers had their inviso-armor failed and their presence been discovered. Their reports were similar to that of my first scout, as follows:

"As I said before, these beings are like us physically, save that instead of being all fair-skinned, there are many whose skin is yellow, brown or black, these forming separate races. These races are, in turn, divided into nations. These nations," here the Commander spoke slowly and with great emphasis, "are constantly warring among themselves. In the entire history of this planet, which we learned by selective telepathy, there has never been a time when nation has not been fighting against na-

tion, and often one section of a nation against another.

"This planet is ideally equipped by nature. There is an abundance of vegetation, minerals, domestic animals and all other necessities of life, while the undoubted ingenuity of the inhabitants has evolved many luxuries. Unfortunately, these beings have so strange and perverted a mentality that most of their efforts are devoted to inventing and manufacturing new and terrible methods and engines of destruction.

"The reasons for these constant wars are so absurd and inconsistent that it is difficult to conceive how any sane mind could put them forth or accept them. For example, they have many religions, most of them divided and subdivided into innumerable sects. In time past, fierce and bloody wars have been brought about by the followers of one religion trying to force their faith on the followers of another. Even the sects of one religion would fight among themselves, each claiming to be the only true interpreter of that particular faith.

"Lately they have found other excuses for wars, even more discreditable. Where they used to fight for what passed as spiritual and idealistic causes, they now fight for mere materialistic gain and temporal power, cloaking them under ridiculously flimsy pretexts. One ruler, for example, declared he was forced to make war to obtain living space for his expanding population, at the same time offering rewards and honors to the parents who raised the largest families! A favorite excuse for war is for some large nation to invade and take over a small nation on the pretext that they are protecting it against attack by some other large nation.

"Treaties, pledges and promises mean nothing to these beings, who seem lost to all sense of honor. Indeed, one ruler's first step in any war was to sign a non-aggression pact with his intended victim. Hypocrisy is rampant on this wretched planet. One large empire proclaimed itself defender of the rights of small nations, but stood calmly by while several small nations were conquered, taking no steps against the aggressor until her own interests were threatened.

"Their methods of warfare are indescribably cruel and savage. All nations indulge in the bombing of large populated

centres, killing men, women and children indiscriminately. Some of the more debased nations even torture to death their prisoners of war.

"At present they have just finished a great war, which they call World War II. Signs are not wanting that the victors are about to quarrel over the spoils, which will result in a war that will stagger the imagination. It is my respectful suggestion that we take over the planet before this calamity occurs. Report ends."

"God of Nature! Is it possible that such beings are permitted to exist!" exclaimed Lan Yotar. "Summon the Elders, Var Dalum."

THE Chief Scribe flicked a switch and a large televisoscreen began to glow. It was divided in ten sections, and in each section appeared the face of an Elder.

"Elders of Norga," said Lan Yotar, "you have heard the report of Commander Ros Vinla?"

"We have," replied the Elders.

"What is your pleasure as regards his suggestion?"

"I move that the Commander be ordered to exterminate the race of wicked madmen who inhabit Planet No. 3 in System A93, and that he take over the said planet in the name of the Confederated Planets of Norga," said an Elder.

"I second the motion," promptly spoke up another.

"Moved by Nov Cherga, seconded by Sah Lovit, that Planet No. 3 in System A93 be taken over by the Confederated Planets of Norga, and the beings inhabiting it be destroyed. All in favor signify in the usual manner." The televisoscreen showed ten right hands raised in assent.

"Commander Ros Vinla."

"Here."

"You have heard the motion. Can you carry out the destruction of the human beings on this planet without harming the lower animals?"

"The vibratensor should do that. It creates a sound wave of such tremendous pitch that a human brain is paralyzed by it, but it is beyond the sound range of the more primitive brain structures."

"Is it painless?" asked Lan Yotar anxiously.

"It causes a few seconds of intense agony just before death occurs," answered the Commander. "May I suggest that, while it is against our law to inflict pain, it is only right and just that these beings should experience a little of the pain they are so willing to inflict on each other."

"The Chief Scribe will put the motion in the form of a Decision," decreed Lan Yotar.

Var Dalum wrote busily for a while, then rose and handed his tablet to the Chief of the Council of Elders, who read it through, sighed regretfully, then read it aloud.

"Decision 14A of the Council of Elders, being an amendment to Decision 14 of the Council of Elders, during the Session of Rulers in the Year 3749 after the Confederation of the Planets of Norga.

"Let this be known as our Decision:

"That Ros Vinla, Commander of the Spacefleet of Norga, totally exterminate the beings, saving and except the lower animals, that inhabit Planet No. 3 in System A93, and take over the said planet in the name of the Confederated Planets of Norga.

"Commander Ros Vinla, you have heard the Decision?"

"I hear and obey."

Unbroken silence reigned in the Chief Scribe's office. Lan Yotar sat with his face in his hands, his lips murmuring soundless prayers to the God of Nature. The faces of the ten Elders, reflected in the televisoscreen, were grave and sad. Even the usually imperturbable Chief Scribe fidgeted nervously with his tablets and from time to time glanced impatiently at the intercommunicator.

At last the signal showed the Commander was ready to report.

"Var Dalum," said the Chief Scribe huskily.

"Greeting from Ros Vinla, Commander of the Spacefleet of Norga, to Var Dalum, Chief Scribe of the Rulers of Norga," came the Commander's emotionless voice. "Peace be with you. Decision 14A carried out.

"That is all."

In The Sphere of Time

By J. W. PELKIE



Illustrated by NAPOLI

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a world as bright and fair as youth. It spun its green and golden beauty in an envelope of blue sky while whirling around a blazing white sun. . . . But beneath the enchanting surface of this world, in a blackness as deep as the void of eternity, thirteen pairs of silvery eyes glowed at a great crystal sphere. The cold air was strung with a thin thrumming as twelve anciently quavering male voices rose and fell in echoing chant.

"Great Prince Toka comes—down the river of Brown of the Outer World. O let the fishes be told! O let the choral begin! For the time ordained is coming to pass!"

Proud Prince Toka had faced—and outwitted—death and disaster before. Yet in this wierdly glowing underworld of Kosanna, peopled by the soft, silvery-eyed ones, there waited a thing he could not defy—destruction of his soul!



With a fervent prayer Toka snatched at his great battle knife.

IN SUN-GOLD BRIEFS AND matching sandals, Toka's lean muscled maleness rippled as he swung the sweep pole of the racing raft. Ahead on each bow corner were balanced the rangy Rok and the youthfully gray Old Ledo, each with long pole ready to clear the swift raft through roiling brown water. In mid-raft, the exquisitely blonde Roya and the sultry dark Elees lounged carefreely on the great pelt of a saber-toothed Big Cat.

There was a sudden familiar roar from the far right shore. The colorfully flowered jungle spread away to rugged red hills that formed the north shoulder of this great valley. Midway bulged a large grassy butte, atop which was poised a colossal slick-skin dinosaur. Smiling, Toka raised an arm to the distant reptile. Red eyes beaming fiercely, the Big Snake yawned its cavernous maw and blasted away a mighty roar.

Roya laughed gayly. "All hail to Toka

—Prince of Sandcliff and King of the Dinosaurs!"

"Look smart ahead!" Old Ledo snapped suddenly.

The party's attention leaped back to the job of piloting the craft through roaring white rapids. Then ahead stretched smooth brown water again. To the left here, a long cliff towered up from the river.

The dark Elees seemed thrilled. "This is the way to travel!"

Roya breathed happily. "From now on—"

Toka stiffened as above the river's deep murmur came human voices in exquisite choral.

Roya glanced to Toka. "But there isn't a sign of human habitation anywhere!"

Toka had already placed the direction. "In that cliff."

Roya wrinkled her nose. "Rubbish."

Then from that cliff came a strange wail, "Tooookaaaa!" It was repeated over and over. "Tooookaaaa! Tooookaaaa!"

The raft nosed around into a broad channel that curved lazily into a cavernous maw in the cliff. The walls and roof glowed with a soft light and the choral of Toka's name came clear and stronger. Toka let the raft drift.

"The river is certainly slow enough in there," Roya mused.

"We could pole our way out easily enough," Elees reflected.

Old Ledo looked at these impetuous ones. "We could not come back another time—when Sandcliff would know where we were going!"

"But what can happen?" Rok protested. "We've got our battle-axes—even Elees and Roya have theirs!"

Old Ledo's unimpressed glance went to mid-raft. There were three great black battle-axes and two smaller ones.

In that instant Toka weighed the pro and con. "We'll go in a little way."

Roya and Elees swiftly placed each man's battle-ax handy then balanced easily in mid-raft with their own light weapons. The lazy current guiding the raft, the men shipped their poles.

Roya suddenly pointed over the side of the raft. "Look! glowing fish—in all colors!"

"But how vicious looking!" Elees exclaimed.

Roya reached into the party's food basket. "I'll toss them a porkchop!"

The chop plopped into the river. The water churned violently—and calmed. The fish had devoured the chop almost instantly! The river was swarming with the vicious creatures now. And the raft was moving faster than the river—a school of the fish adhering to the craft and driving it!

As Toka swiftly used the sweep, Rok and Old Ledo thrust their poles as brakes. But the water roiled violently and in instants the fish shredded sweep and poles off at the water line. Above the party's heads the choral slowly rose in volume. As the raft rounded a huge bend, Toka felt his nerves tighten.

The luminous cavern and its river straightened and flowed between colossal green pillars set close together from wall to wall and from roof down into the river. The raft was only twenty paces from the colossal grill and being driven inexorably toward it. The choral of Toka's name came through even clearer. . . .

"Look!" Roya exclaimed.

RISING SILENTLY, the massive columns hung from the roof like green fangs. The fish drove the raft on, and the columns descended with a watery whisper. The cavern widened. From the right bank, fields and forests stretched away. On the left bank was a city of spheroid structure. Massed along the banks and bridges, the choralers were human, their green attire but scantily adequate, their titian hair worn in a loop between the shoulders.

The raft scraped gently against a wharf and Toka led his party ashore. As the patriarchal dignitaries stepped forward, Toka noted another universal characteristic—all these strange people had pale silvery eyes.

But Roya was startled by something else. "Toka! Those figurines on their necklaces are perfect likenesses of you!"

The oldest patriarch was reverent. "Yes, fair Roya. All Kosanna wears Great Prince Toka's divine likeness."

Toka glanced a warning to his startled comrades—accept this situation and play along.

"Great Prince Toka," the patriarch bid,

"Your palanquins await your divine pleasure."

Toka lounged into the one bearing his likeness on its sides, Roya and the others occupied the rest. The procession wound through the city, into a great square packed with choraling Kosannans and toward a colossal statue that was Toka, even to his royally engraved weapons!

On the great white altar base black braziers were being lit by beautiful girls. As the procession came beside the altar, a girl with a jeweled wand stepped down to march on the right side of Toka's palanquin. The way led on across the square and to a great white-and-gold stairway that rose away to an immense domed palace. All choraling abruptly ceased and the bearers gently lowered the palanquins. Toka and party stepped out.

The old patriarch assumed a ceremonial pose. "O Great Prince Toka. No farther may we lowly ones travel." He bowed to the girl with the wand. "May you and the Princess Wanda now ascend to your divinely ordained tasks."

Aware of Roya's sarcastically raised eyebrow, Toka played on. "Lead up, good Princess Wanda."

Halfway up the long stairway, Rok frowned. "What gets me—"

A great gong throbbled urgently.

Wanda whirled. "O great Prince Toka! Your first test is at hand!" She raced away for the distant summit of the stairway.

In moments the square and city below were deserted. Toka and the men formed a V around Roya and Elees.

"What's that flapping sound?" Roya puzzled.

Toka trained his eyes on that distant cavern into which the river vanished after passing Kosanna. And from that black hole shot six huge dragons! Mottled a pale yellow and green and equipped with great wings, their sinuous lengths tapered to a series of blue rattles. Their triangular skulls were set with unwinking pink eyes. From their upper jaws great yellow fangs curved down to vicious pin-points.

As the dragons streaked for his party, Toka's powerful being sang for action and his great battle-ax was a whistling blur. His voice was cool. "Take their fangs first!"

The dragons' huge rattles began vibrating angrily. One dragon shot on for the top of the stairway. Hissing viciously, the remaining ones ganged in for Toka and company.

Toka's battle-ax cracked true and sent fangs spinning away. Clear venom dripping from the stumps, the dragon instantly recoiled in violent pain. But another came streaking in. Again Toka's battle-ax shot true in that one-two cracking and a second victim convulsed violently and collided with the angry others. All five were a wild melee over the square.

A scream slashed through the din. Toka glanced. Blue tail coiled about Wanda, the sixth dragon was winging away.

"Here they come again!" Rok warned.

Having untangled themselves, the five unburdened dragons were tearing back to the attack.

Toka's command was cool and taut. "Serve it straight!"

His whistling battle-ax struck between a set of those blazing eyes and tore through in a bloody shower. In violent death throes, the monster was piling onto the stairway. But another was hurtling in. Again Toka's vicious battle-ax tore home and another dragon was piling down.

A slimy scaliness whipped around Toka's legs. His battle-ax butchered huge coils but others replaced them with crushing power and great wings pounded him.

THEN he saw a coil whip around Roya and a terrible strength surged from his depths. His mighty ax was a screaming viciousness. He was free and leaping for Roya and slashing those coils from her. He snatched her clear and whirled to catalog the battle scene. The surviving dragons were retreating hurriedly into the down-river cavern.

The mysterious gong of Kosanna was instantly exultant. The people began pouring from hiding. Princesses were gathering atop the stairway, and from all Kosannan throats came a great cheer.

But Toka was anxiously eyeing the gore-spattered Roya. "All right now?"

As she restored her sun-gold briefs to flattering modesty, Roya's blue eyes fondly held him. "How about yourself?"

Shifting his own gory briefs aright, Toka grinned. "Looking for a bath."

Elees joined them. "If this crazy place has a bath!"

Turning from the mess of heads, coils and wings strewn down the great stairway, Toka led the way on up.

"Hey!" Rok urged sardonically. "Listen to what those palace girls up yonder are yodeling!"

"Ascend, ascend, ascend!" Roya mimicked sarcastically. "Ascend, O Great Prince Toka! Ascend to your divine abode!" Roya's last remark was not in mimicry. "Blah, blah, blah!"

"Watch yourselves," Toka warned quietly as they neared the terrace.

The princesses formed a cortege about Toka and party. In the concave entry of the palace, a princess with a black wand waited alone.

An odd exaltation was in her voice. "O Great Prince Toka. Welcome to your divine palace. I am Princess Alota." With a bow, she turned and led them down an immense hall. "Great Prince Toka's Hall Of Life," Alota intoned.

BEGINNING on the inner sides of the great entry portals, art work progressively lined the walls and the many sets of huge doors. In exquisite execution it portrayed Toka's eventful life from birth in distant Sandcliff to his latest victory—exactly as it had all occurred! But ahead for fully a hundred paces the Hall stretched green and bare, except for a huge bas-relief of Toka on the set of doors at the far end.

"How can they know all this?" Elees puzzled softly.

"And why," Roya worried quietly, "don't they show the rest of the future?"

Toka was gentle but royally commanding. "Princess Alota, why has this not been finished?"

Alota answered humbly. "As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows his Hall Of Life cannot be extended until the divinely ordained times." Leading them to the pair of doors at which the Hall ended, Alota touched her wand to each, then stood obsequiously aside as the portals began swinging away. "O Great Prince Toka. Your personal rooms."

Old Ledo strolled in last and the great doors began swinging to.

"O Great Prince Toka," Alota bid.

"When you have refreshed yourself, we shall return to escort you to your banquet."

As the doors snugged together, Toka was to them, ear to the crevice where they joined.

"Well?" Rok urged impatiently.

"Gone back up the Hall." Toka pressed this side of the doors. No action.

"We could tune up our little axes on them," Rok suggested laconically. Toka hesitated.

Old Ledo was dry. "Perhaps we'll meet the so-called brains of this mad society at that banquet."

"Likely." Toka joined in cataloguing the room.

Widowless, and illumined by the softly glowing ceiling, it was a restful lounge room. Roya pushed open the plain green door at the rear. Battle-axes idling, Toka and the others followed. A short cross-corridor led into luxurious bedrooms. The left one had three large beds, the right two huge ones.

"Everything for every one of us," Roya mused.

"But no bath!" Elees complained.

"I've found it!" Rok shouted.

All followed him through the door opposite the lounge room. The newest room was all green. Around the pool ran a generous width of stone floor.

Dropping her ax, Elees ran for the white diving board. Her voice rang in merry challenge. "Last one in is a glue-foot!"

Rok raced after her. "Not me!"

Roya abruptly flung her arm around Toka's neck and tumbled them both in—and the water frolic was on.

Refreshed and clean again, the party split to the respective bedrooms. Toka faced Rok and Old Ledo. "Any ideas?"

"The Kosannans we've seen so far," Old Ledo offered, "are anything but combative."

"We could butcher them by the hundreds." Rok toyed with his battle-ax. "Only. . . ."

"Perhaps," Toka hoped as he led for the lounge room, "we'll learn something definite at that banquet."

Roya and Elees were waiting. At once a reverent knocking came on the great entry doors.

Assuming his role, Toka intoned royally, "Enter!" The great doors began swinging in.

As the procession moved up the Hall Of Life, Toka was startled by the addition to the reliefs on the wall—a perfect portrayal of the frolic in the bathing pool!

"I," Old Ledo mused dryly, "didn't see any of them in there with us."

Surfacely casual, Toka spoke ahead to their guide, "Kosanna's artisans are swift, O Princess Alota—as well as accurate."

Alota bowed her titian head in acknowledgment. "As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows the scene of his frolic in his pool was ready for installation even before he came to Kosanna."

Proceeding to a pair of doors on her right, Alota led them into a vast auditorium, beautifully scened of wall and softly glowing of vaulted ceiling. There was a tremendous black banquet table, its center gleaming and bare. Beside ornate black chairs down each side, hundreds of beautiful princesses stood expectantly. At the far end of the table was a great stage, its black curtain hanging in huge folds. An enchanting perfume filled the air.

Toka sauntered to the quintet of white chairs at the head of the table. Each chair back bore a small but perfect likeness of the member of the "divine" party who was to sit in it.

"Aren't there any men in this palace?" Elees wondered lowly.

"Maybe the whole place is a harem," Rok posed puckishly, "just waiting for Toka."

Toka was aware of Roya instantly stiffening. Comparing her sunny blonde and creamy-tan loveliness with the titian and milk-white beauty of the Kosanna princesses, Toka failed to see why Roya should be irritated.

Alota raised her wand. At once the curtain on the distant stage rustled aside to reveal a choir of sheerly gowned princesses who began a low choraling. With a swaying of diaphanous gown, the choir parted and a line of graceful girls danced out, bearing large trays.

"Brother!" Rok gaped.

Toka felt the warmth creeping into his face. If those dancing girls wore more than silver gilt it was not discernible. And

straight down to Toka the creatures danced. After passing each tray before him, as if for benediction, the girls danced away right and left, serving first the rest of Toka's party and then the princesses down each side of the table.

As the exotic banquet progressed, a thought occurred to Toka. "O Princess Alota."

"As Great Prince Toka wishes."

"Are here gathered all my ones of my palace?"

"As Great Prince Toka knows all, so he knows that tomorrow he shall meet the Council Of Kosanna's Old Ones."

"So," Roya mocked quietly, "the big brains aren't dining with us after all!"

"They'd probably pop an old blood vessel at sight of these dancing girls!" Elees mused sardonically.

AS HIS PARTY was escorted down the Hall Of Life, Toka was only mildly surprised at the newest scene—of the banquet from beginning to end. Escorted into the lounge room, Toka and party watched the great doors swing shut.

Elees yawned, "At least we seem to have some privacy."

Roya was drowsy. "Is it getting dark or am I just sleepy?"

"Hey," Rok affirmed lazily, "the ceilings are dimming."

Old Ledo now yawned. "Even have night and day in this crazy cave."

"Let's go to bed," Elees urged from her lethargy.

Old Ledo yawned again. "I guess they won't bother us."

"After all," Toka reasoned lazily. "why wear ourselves out tonight when we're going to meet those Old Ones tomorrow anyway?"

Rok yawned. "Sure! Let's grab some sleep."

Roya and Elees pulled down the silky rustling covers of their beds.

Elees yawned. "I could go to bed with all my clothes on." She sat on her bed—and swayed backward.

The utter lethargy was pulling Roya into her own invitingly soft bed. "Who needs . . . clothes off. . . ."

Elees was beyond answering. Roya, too, relaxed into the dreamless depths.

Toka tossed down the rustling covers

of his bed. Sleep weighted his eyelids and pulled at his consciousness. Not even bothering to remove battle knives, Rok and Old Ledo were sprawling into their beds. Sandals, battle knife and all, Toka stretched out on his bed and sank into its wonderful softness. "Been a . . . big day. . . ."

Rok and Old Ledo could not answer. Toka let the restful void take him.

II

TOKA'S DREAMLESS SLUMBER

seemed to have lasted but moments. The ceiling was just returning to its full light of day as Toka sat up. The beds of Rok and Old Ledo were empty. And Toka's weapons were nowhere to be found! He was into the girls' room. Nothing! He was to the pool. Nothing. He stepped to the lounge room. The emptiness mocked him. Why couldn't he have seen that drowsiness last night was abnormal! Hot anger spread through Toka. *If anyone had harmed Roya. . . .* Picking up a stone lounge, Toka slammed it to the doors. The heavy lounge shattered—the doors stood impervious. Why hadn't he and Rok used their battle-axes when they had the chance!

The great doors suddenly opened and the cortege was there.

Toka's voice was a whip. "Where are my comrades!"

Alota bowed servantly. "Only the Council Of Kosanna's Old Ones may now answer Toka's divine testing."

If only these princesses were men so a man could beat a straight answer out of them! "Then take me to the Old Ones at once!" Toka strode into the Hall Of Life and followed Alota.

Toka scarcely noted another pair of scenes—one showing him and his party asleep last night, the other portraying his quarters awry and him whaling that lounge against the doors.

Alota was touching her wand to a pair of great doors on her left, to reveal a golden stairway leading up in a broad spiral. Alert, Toka leaped up the long spiral to a pair of gigantic black doors. They swung away and Toka stepped through. He was on a broad black terrace that circled a vast court. A golden light diffused through the domed roof. In mid-

court a huge crystal sphere rested atop a black sculpture of nude maidens.

Seated in great chairs around the far half of the court were twelve men in voluminous black robes. Above flowing white beards their features displayed the withering of antiquity. Their silvery eyes never wavered from Toka.

"O Great Prince Toka," a mellow contralto intoned, "Queen Kolano and the Old Ones welcome your divine presence!"

In the huge black chair directly between the twelve Old Ones sat a woman surpassing in beauty all Kosanna's princesses. Her attire was the typical green scantiness—brilliantly jeweled.

"Where are my friends and weapons!" Toka's demand rang in the vaulted court.

Kolano's contralto echoed mellowly. "O Great Prince Toka—behold the Sphere Of All Time!"

Kolano and the Old Ones centered their silvery eyes on the huge Sphere. A faint thrumming sang through the court and a chill swept the air. The golden light faded swiftly. The Sphere seemed suspended in a black void.

"O Great Prince Toka!" Kolano intoned. "Behold the time of Present!"

The Sphere shone with a pale cold light and Toka saw his quarters. The rooms had been cleaned and straightened. Rok and Old Ledo were sprawled comfortably on their beds, their weapons beside them. The Sphere Of All Time abruptly dulled.

"O Great Prince Toka!" Once more Kolano's contralto echoed through the chill and thrumming air, "Behold the time of Past and Present!"

Again the Sphere shone with that pale cold light. Toka saw Kosanna's square as in moonlight and shadow. The door between the feet of that colossal statue of him swung in. Led by Alota, a procession of princesses marched out—each four carrying a black bier on which lay a girl. The first eight wore only small Toka figurines between their breasts. These eight girls were laid in a row on the fore edge of the altar.

Two more biers were carried out. Deprived only of weapons and consciousness, their occupants were Roya and Elees! They were added to the girls at altar's edge. At a wave of Alota's wand the princesses retired.

Toka wanted to cry out—but even in speech he was immobile! And ten dragons swept over the deserted city. Flapping above the altar, each monster whipped its tail about a girl and carried her away. Back over the city the dragons lined—and shot into that down-river cavern.

The Sphere Of All Time held to the route—through a dungeon gloom, on to a wierdly illumined area of slowly swirling steam and grotesque stalagmites, then through a black tunnel guarded by a dragon at coiled rest. Down into a vast red pit of stalagmites and stalactites, of yellow steam and slimy green moss hangings, the way led. And each dragon placed its prize in a green cage, latched the door, then flapped away into a great den of their own.

Regaining consciousness and beholding their position, the Kosanna girls began shuddering in abject fear. Of finer stuff, Roya and Elees fought to retain reason and hope—when a horde of the pit's inhabitants came into view!

Terror ripped through Toka. The things were half man and half dragon, their slimy scaliness a shiny black mottled through with a fiery red. From their flat reptilian heads lidless red eyes burned with an insatiable lust. From their mouths yellow fangs thrust down to vicious needle-points. Their hands and feet ended in ten long and sinuous digits. Their bodies continued on down beyond their pelvis to become a tail that ended in a restless coil of blue rattles.

The Sphere Of All Time toured that pit. Working abjectly at cutting and gathering moss, or hopeless slaves in the dens pocking the pit's perimeter, were hundreds of Kosanna girls.

Fear and rage tore through Toka. Yet even with the tremendous strength that came surging from his depths he could not move or speak!

The Sphere Of All Time dulled. The taut thrumming and chill faded. The blackness changed swiftly to golden light. Kolano and the Old Ones centered their silvery eyes on Toka. The spell dropped from him.

TOKA whirled to leave—but in that instant he could not move! The Old Ones' silvery eyes on him, Toka heard Kolano's contralto echo in the vast court.

"As divinely ordained, Great Prince Toka shall listen."

Though he strained mightily, he could not do otherwise.

"When the Dragon Women bore only males and so became extinct," Kolano's contralto echoed calmly, "the men of Ophid exacted tribute from Kosanna. Yet Kosanna girls gave birth only to Dragon Men. Thus, even though Kosanna grows ever less, ten girls still are sacrificed each night—lest Ophid come and destroy all Kosanna and take all our girls."

Toka's voice was his to make an angry demand. "Why were Roya and Elees included last night!"

Kolano smiled calmly. "As ordained by the Sphere Of All Time, Great Prince Toka must have that incentive to destroy Ophid."

Toka blazed his request. "Then restore my fellow warriors and me at once—that we may attack Ophid!"

"On one condition."

If only he could regain his weapons! The sweat of fear was on him now. "What is your condition!"

"Great Prince Toka must wed me first."

The woman was mad! Toka rang out his instant decision. "I refuse!"

Kolano shrugged. "Great Prince Toka is even now reconsidering—and seeing that certain things are ordained."

Held immobile and bathed in a cold sweat, Toka found his swift mind reconsidering. Roya and Elees—about to be—He dare not think it—his reason would shatter to insanity! The sweat dripped into his eyes as he fought his voice from shaking. "I accept!"

Kolano was smiling softly. "Great Prince Toka may now return to his rooms. The wedding shall then occur—after which Toka shall be given his weapons and sent to the realm of Ophid."

The Old Ones' silvery eyes lessened their hypnotic intensity and Toka whirled for the opening doors. A gong was joyous somewhere outside. An exultant choraling was beginning. The high portals at the bottom of the spiral stairway swung in as Toka neared the last step. The cortege ran to escorting position as Toka raced down the Hall Of Life. He spared a glance for the latest art work—a portrayal of his recent experiences up in that domed court.

Alota was flashing her wand to his doors. Toka was across the restored lounge room and into his bedroom—was shaking Rok violently, then Old Ledo.

"Holy lizards!" Rok snapped. "What's wrong?"

The distant gonging and choraling an affirming background, Toka tried to begin educating his friends.

But the angry Rok leaped for the lounge room. "I'll murder every blasted Kosannan and dragon in my way!"

The deadly angry Old Ledo's voice rasped more sanely. "We've got to get Toka's swpons first!"

Rok swung abruptly to Toka. "Where are they!"

"I get them after I marry Kolano!"

Rok and Old Ledo stared. But the portals were swinging. Alota and the cortege was waiting. Toka had to play his part out—it was the fastest way.

Toka sped back up the Hall Of Life. A new scene had been added—Toka awakening Rok and Old Ledo and his explanatory discussion with them. The great entry portals were swinging and Kosanna's exalted gonging and choraling flooded about Toka as he ran down the long stairway. The massed Kosannans in the square formed a lane to the altar where Kolano was waiting.

"I've never killed any woman," Rok offered loyally, "but—"

"Save it for the Dragon Men!" Toka leaped to the altar and strode for the edge. The gonging and choraling was so tremendous that the very stonework vibrated underfoot.

WITH a gaze of coming passion, Kolano turned. "O Great Prince Toka—it is the moment."

"Let's get on with it!" Toka snapped.

Kolano raised a jeweled arm to the Kosannans. The gonging and choraling abruptly silenced. The door between the feet of the colossal statue swung away and the black-robed Old Ones marched out in a double line to Toka and Kolano. The leading two ceremoniously carried deeply fringed black pillows, one goldenly embroidered GREAT PRINCE TOKA, the other GREAT QUEEN KOLANO. All twelve Old Ones began a sing-song chant in anciently quavering voices.

"O Great Prince Toka! O Great Queen Kolano! Take up your ring! Take up your ring! . . ."

As did Kolano from hers, so Toka took up the fiery jeweled ring from his pillow.

"Face each other! Face each other!" the Old Ones chanted as all Kosanna listened.

Toka fought his features expressionless. ". . . Extend left hands! Extend left hands! . . ."

Kolano's silvery eyes smouldered possessively at Toka.

". . . Extend third fingers! Extend third fingers! . . ."

The cold sweat was bathing Toka again. But no immobility held him—only desire to get his great battle weapons and go for Roya!

". . . Place your rings! Place your rings! . . ."

Where was his ax and knife!

". . . On the other's finger! On the other's finger! . . ."

Toka thrust his ring on Kolano's marriage finger and received her brilliant band.

". . . You are one! You are one! . . ."
The Old Ones paused. "It is done!"

At once all Kosanna was gonging and choraling to the heights of joy. The air beat with it. The stone trembled with it. Rok and Old Ledo were muttering savagely. Kolano was trying to embrace Toka.

He thrust her from him. "My weapons—where are they?"

Disappointment was momentarily hot in Kolano's eyes. "They are here, O Great Prince Toka! And your canoe awaits beside the wharf!"

From beneath the voluminous robes of the second pair of Old Ones appeared Toka's weapons. Snatching his battle knife and buckling it on, Toka grabbed his great battle-ax and leaped from the altar. The wildly joyous Kosannans parted. Rok and Old Ledo fleet at his flanks, Toka raced across the square and down to the wharf. Only a long black canoe was awaiting. In a split instant Toka was kneeling at the bow thwart with black paddle in hand. Rok was as ready amidstships, Old Ledo in the stern.

The men thrust free of the wharf and dug their paddles. The canoe leaped for the down-river cavern. Only dripping

gloom met straining eyes. Only the liquid swishing of three paddles digging fast and deep came to the ears. And ever Toka's being strained ahead to that hell-hole where Roya was. . . .

III

THE CANOE SHOT ON LIKE A fleet black ghost. Suddenly the river ended in a great whirlpool just ahead and the cavern spread away on the right, its extent shrouded in shifting haze rising from pools of many colors. Slowing the canoe into a cluster of stalagma, Toka tied it secure and stepped ashore. Slithering dangerously on the warm muck, he ran between boiling pools and swallowing slime holes, Rok and Old Ledo at his heels.

The mucky way led uphill and the haze began eddying into thin strands to reveal a glistening black wall ridged with colorful columns. Peering from behind one that towered away into the shifting haze, Toka considered the huge opening at the summit of this mucky slope.

Old Ledo wrinkled his nose eloquently. "The thing's in there!"

"Rok and I will get behind those columns to each side of that opening," Toka decided swiftly. "When I wave my arm Old Ledo will tap this column with his ax."

The haze eddied back. Toka and Rok separated on their swift ways. Rok was quickly into position. Edging out, Toka peered warily into the tunnel. Midway back and dimly revealed by the weird light reflected in from out here was one of the huge dragons, fanged head resting atop mighty coils and wings, lidless pink eyes watchful.

Raising his arm and dropping it, Toka poised. Old Ledo tapped the column and a deep chime-tone shimmered on the warm air. There was a scaly sliding within the tunnel and that huge fanged head thrust out. That greenly mottled yellow body began following in long undulations. That rattlered tail finally flipped clear and Toka shot across the muck. His mighty battle-ax bit home and tore on through—and that tail could buzz no warning. The dragon convulsed with beating wings only to have Rok's great ax whistle into the base of its skull. Old Ledo came loping up the mucky

slope and in intense moments it was all over—the remains tossed into slime holes that gulped away all traces. Even the wildly churned muck of the slope was settling back into a tawny smoothness that told no tales.

Rok and Old Ledo at his heels, Toka raced the length of the tunnel. It opened onto a small red ledge overlooking a shifting haze shot through with varicolored light. Columns of brilliant shadings thrust massively from it only to vanish again into the yellow vapor. Pale green moss hangings swung lazily and the musky stench of reptiles was heavy on the steamy air.

Rok and Old Ledo following, Toka was fleeting down the narrow path that dropped from the ledge in a great curve. Hissing laughter and voices drifting thinly through the eddying haze now, Toka and comrades slipped behind a huge moss drape and peered carefully about.

The path spread away onto the floor of the pit. Through crusty cracks in the red rock, vapor spiraled up to form the shifting haze. Stretching away right and left, the pit's moss-hung walls towered from view.

Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka stepped from the moss drape and strode swiftly for a mighty column. *Covered by the haze and taking advantage of these columns—*

Around that column darted a redly mottled black Dragon Boy. His snaky features gaped. Also startled, Toka flashed his battle-ax to kill him. But the boy scrambled too agilely and raced away into the haze—his tail vibrating the warning!

TOKA'S GAZE leaped to a nearby door. Battle-ax swinging, he stepped in. Old Ledo shut the door. In the pale green light given off by the low ceiling the storage den was unoccupied.

"To the back!" Toka was scrambling over the springy moss heaps, Rok and Old Ledo with him.

At the back: the men burrowed from view. The den's door clanked open and the raucous sounds of the great search came clearer.

"How would they know where to hide!" a searcher hissed.

The moss transmitted the weights and movements of the searchers—directly over-

head now. Toka could even hear them breathing.

"King Ophid is right!" a disgruntled searcher hissed. "The boy has been drinking too much moss dew!"

The clamor in the pit suddenly sharpened.

"Now what!" an exasperated searcher hissed.

"The tunnel dragon is gone without trace!" another deciphered.

"The thing is probably only out looking around!" the exasperated searcher reasoned. "Why doesn't King Ophid call off this looking," he hissingly whispered, "so we can eat some of our moss and go to nest."

"Fool!" the disgruntled searcher hissed softly. "The moss supervisor is watching us!" He spoke in louder hiss, "Come on—there's nothing here!"

The searchers scrambled away, the door slammed and Toka rifled his gaze over the moss heaps. The den was deserted. Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka was to the door. The search in the pit fast subsiding, Toka eased the door a crack. The hazy stalagmited scene deserted, Toka slipped out with battle-ax ready. Rok followed lightly. Old Ledo came along and closed the door cluelessly.

Rok and Old Ledo at his heels, Toka stole swiftly for the center of the silent pit—and the cages. But every one was empty!

The fear ripped through Toka. "Old Ledo, take the back third of the pit! Rok, take the right third! Listen at every door! Get Roya and Elees—or kill them." Toka spoke grimly on. "All doors open out—brace each one! We'll meet at the moss den!"

Rok and Old Ledo whirled away. At the first door of his own area, Toka heard only Dragon Men. Snatching up a shard from a column, he braced it against the door and was away. Den after den of Dragon Men was swiftly secured.

A den of slave girls was encountered. "Get out!" Toka commanded tersely. "Hide in the moss den by the path!" The pitiful girls filed away.

Toka was on—securing the massive double doors to the vast den of the huge dragons. But he must be near to the end of his sector—and no Roya!

Peering around a massive column, Toka saw the haze ahead abruptly thin—to reveal an ornate doorway above which was sculptured a spiked collar. To each side of this door a huge dragon lay coiled on guard. The yellow haze swirled back over the scene.

"Toka!" Roya's voice cried. "Tok—"

Fear ripping through him, Toka leaped for that door. In the yellow haze the first dragon reared its head and flexed its massive coils. Toka's knife arm whipped and his vicious blade was a black glitter. The dragon darted its head but Toka's battle knife sank to its hilt between those baleful pink eyes. The dragon hissed and shuddered. The second one slid from the haze. Toka's battle-ax whistled viciously and sent the ugly head toppling from its sinuous body.

Leaping over the dying dragons, Toka slammed his battle-ax to that door. It flapped out—and rage exploded through Toka!

THE hissing laughter of the Dragon Men threaded through the stark screaming of the Kosanna girls.

"They're coming for us now!" Elees gasped.

A group of the Dragon Men gathered about the cage. One was unlatching the trap door.

As the Dragon Man advanced, Roya command, "We are not of Kosanna! Take us to your master!"

The Dragon Man grinned mockingly. "You, fair one, are for our King Ophid! But you, dark one—" Leaping with startling speed, he bowled Roya and Elees to the scummy floor.

Elees fought to escape the slimy creature. Roya battled to help. But that rattled tail uncoiled with blinding speed to smash her back and the Dragon Man was carrying the frantically struggling Elees from the cage. Roya leaped to follow—only to have gleeful Dragon Men clang the door in her face. Instantly backing from the snaky fingers clawing through the bars, Roya watched Elees born away into the eddying haze and stench.

Then there was an imperious vibration of rattlers. The mob about Roya's cage instantly backed away and from out of

the shifting haze swaggered a giant Dragon Man wearing a spiked collar set with flashing gems.

Flinging the cage door wide, he strode in with his voice hissing, "Ah, the new Queen of King Ophid's realm!"

Roya fought to control her terror. "My friend and I are not of Kosanna! Release us or our people shall destroy you!"

The King of the Dragon Men only reached for her. Roya ducked and leaped. Ophid's claws grazed her back, then she was past him and the door yawned ahead. But with blinding swiftness Ophid's tail whipped around Roya's ankle and crashed her to the floor. Then his sinuous arms wrapped about her and he was carrying her away through the eddying haze and stench to a door above which was sculptured a spiked collar. Two dragons were coiled on guard beside the door.

"Toka!" Roya cried in stark desperation. "Toka!"

There was only hissing laughter, mocking her.

Thrusting Roya free, Ophid fingered the small masonries of the latch area. In the sickly green light cast by the interior stonework, the den was low and huge. As Ophid moved slowly toward her, Roya dodged around the table and grasped the back of a chair. Red eyes staring hypnotically, Ophid slowly rounded the table and came toward her.

His snaky arms and hands began reaching slowly for her. Her flesh cringed as though she were already naked. But she could not move—could not utter a sound!

Held by Ophid's red eyes, Roya felt her legs quivering. She sensed those snaky fingers reaching closer and closer. In but a moment those hands would—

A frantic buzzing sounded from the pit and a pounding came on the door.

Snaky features scowling, Ophid flung the portal wide. "What's all this nonsense!"

"But, sire," a Dragon Man hissed, "a boy swears he just saw the three warriors from the Outer World!"

... the three warriors from the Outer World cut through Roya's hypnotized mind. Toka had come!

"The boy's mad!" Ophid hissed angrily. "No one could get past the tunnel dragon!"

"But, sire!" the alarmed Dragon Man

furthered. "The boy swears the three warriors are those who bested your six dragons sent to Kosanna!"

"All right, all right!" Ophid accepted impatiently. "We'll search the place and see! And if any—" The door slammed shut.

ROYA was to it. It was locked. Racing her hands to find the releasing mechanism, she listened to the commotion outside. Every Dragon Man and Boy and winged reptile must be searching the pit!

The door abruptly gave out from Roya's desperately searching hands! But she shocked back as the King of the Dragon Men strode in. His adroit tail flicked the door shut. Roya was behind a nearby chair. Ophid turned to finger the latch. With strength born of new hope, Roya grasped the chair and leaped. Ophid whirled and tried to convulse away. The chair missed his head but slammed down on his arms and staggered him.

Glimpsing success, Roya flailed the chair again. But Ophid whipped his tail around her ankle and threw her off balance as he tore the chair from her hands.

Roya contorted to sink her teeth into that tail coiled around her ankle. Ophid hissed with pain. Leaping free, Roya snatched the other chair as she dodged around the table. Ophid only stood before the door—his red eyes burning unwinkingly. Roya knew he was trying to hypnotize her again. But if she didn't let herself watch him. . . .

Roya centered her gaze on his redly mottled black torso. But Ophid was swaying in a slow sinuous rhythm. Roya felt herself begin swaying with him. In violent desperation Roya hurled her chair. Ophid only caught it and set it down softly. There were no more this side of the table.

Ophid began moving slowly toward Roya. His hissing voice was like his eyes—impelling. "There are no warriors from your Outer World. There is no one. . . ."

In desperation Roya upended the table and darted for the door. Only reaching out, Ophid eased the table to the floor. Roya fumbled frantically at the latch—but couldn't release it! Feeling Ophid's eyes burning over her, she whirled. Rippling sinuously, tail swaying in rhythm, Ophid was moving slowly backward.

His hissing voice was an opiate. "It is useless, fair one. You cannot resist what is to be. . . ."

Had Toka and the others not really come!

Ophid was standing by his filthy nest now. "Come, fair one," he bid softly. "Come, fair one . . . come. . . ."

Those eyes—that voice. . . . Flesh chilled and crawling, Roya took a slow step—another. . . .

". . . And another step, fair one . . . one more . . . just one more. . . ."

Roya took another slow step—into those arms.

". . . Relax, fair one . . . relax . . . relax. . . ."

His scaly arms tightened about her. His fingers moved over her. His scaly chest pressed against her breast. His slimy legs touched against her. His facile tail coiled up around her flesh. Her legs quivered. . . .

Roya's senses reeled. If only she could speak . . . one word. . . .

"Toka!" Roya heard her scream as from a distance. "Tok—" Ophid's slimy lips were on her mouth. . . .

Ophid glanced up as his den door slammed out. Battle-ax swinging and rage flaming through him, Toka leaped the overturned table. With one convulsion Ophid hurled Roya at Toka, kicked aside the mossy nest and plunged through the floor. Fast as thought Toka dropped his ax and caught Roya.

She met his anxious gaze. "I'm all right now, Toka."

Snatching up his ax, Toka hurried Roya for the doorway. As he braced Ophid's den, the haze momentarily thinned, revealing the next door, a considerable distance beyond, had been braced—by Rok as he had begun on that sector. Taking Roya's arm, Toka hurried through the shifting haze and stalagma.

"But Elees!" Roya protested.

The haze swirled away ahead, revealing Rok and an unharmed Elees and Old Ledo.

"Let's get out!" Toka ran for the path. Old Ledo ran to the moss den. "All right, come on!" The pitiful slave girls fell in behind the old warrior as he joined Toka on the narrow path.

The ledge came into sight. Toka eased

to the tunnel's maw. Midway back, a dragon was coiled on guard. Drawing back, Toka held up one finger. Rok and Old Ledo joined him.

Toka breathed, "Take it as it comes!" He skipped a rock across the ledge.

There was a heavy sliding within the tunnel and the dragon's head thrust out. Rok and Old Ledo with him, Toka leaped with battle-ax flashing. The three blades tore true and the dragon's head toppled over the ledge. Aided by butchering blows of great axes, the violently convulsing body plunged after.

The tunnel's stinking gloom was traversed and the escapees crowded the mucky shore of the underground river. Old Ledo came back, "No canoe."

But that dilemma was instantly flung into the background as a murmur suddenly swept through the hopeless slave girls. Even as Toka glanced to ascertain the reason, the pitiful creatures began walking into the river. Instantly the vicious fish swarmed. The first slaves went down like mown blades of grass. The ones behind came on —hopeless, impassive, unstoppable!

Placing an arm about Roya's shoulders as she covered her face with her hands, Toka turned sickly away.

The river was finally quiet but for the empty swallowing of its whirlpool.

"Look!" Roya exclaimed.

IV

TOKA FOLLOWED ROYA'S GAZE up river. As if guided by an invisible pilot, an empty black canoe was drifting straight toward Toka. The party was swiftly in. Thrusting his paddle into the mucky bank, Toka shoved the canoe into the current. The paddles dipped, the canoe shot upstream into the gloom of the winding cavern.

Roya's voice echoed musically. "Isn't that a ring you're wearing, Toka?"

A miracle she hadn't noticed the damnable thing sooner!

"Let me see it!" Roya laughed.

"No time to stop paddling."

"But where did you get it?"

"Kosanna." Better he had stayed in the pit of Ophid!

Roya sensed something in Toka's quiet

terseness, in the odd silence of Rok and Old Ledo, "Toka, what does it mean?"

Only the swift thrusting of the paddles and the swush of the river against the canoe's shell filled the next moments. Roya's patient waiting for an answer was inescapable.

"It means," Toka replied quietly, "that I . . . shall not be leaving Kosanna."

Roya took it surprisingly well. "And the rest of us?"

"Free to go, I guess."

"Why can't you come too?" Roya wouldn't give up till she knew.

Toka tried to keep it factual. "I married Queen Kolano."

"And who is Queen Kolano?"

Toka tried to explain. "Lives in the palace—up in the domè or some place. I met her—" Why explain his crazy trance! "So. . . ."

"Toka, I hope you and Queen Kolano will be very happy." Roya quivered with the hurt.

The dank cavern curved—to reveal the distant glow of Kosanna. Joyous choraling came on the air.

The singing was a mockery to Toka. "Roya, look. I only—"

"I understand perfectly." Roya dismissed him.

Rok cut in. "See here, Roya—"

"Let it go!" Toka ordered edgily. *He'd gotten what he'd paid for.*

The canoe shot into the full light of Kosanna and closed to the wharf. Toka led his party ashore. The joyous choraling filled the air and trembled the stone underfoot.

Flanked by the impassive Old Ones, Kolano stepped forward. "We hail Great Prince Toka's triumphant return." Flinging her arms around Toka's neck, she searched her eager lips for his.

Toka thrust free. "These others may now return to the Outer World?"

"In that very canoe," Kolano assured freely.

Rok was loyal. "I'll stay."

"Double it," Old Ledo added.

Elees glanced to Roya.

Toka spared them. "Thanks. But Kolano and I shall make out all right."

Toka watched Roya and his friends paddle away into that upstream cavern. Rok, Old Ledo and Elees glanced back and

waved. Roya only faced straight ahead. The canoe turned the bend and was gone.

Shrugging hopelessly, Toka turned away.

Thirteen ornate palanquins awaited. Toka joined Kolano in the double one. The Old Ones sat into the others.

As the procession moved through Kosanna, Toka drilled his gaze into Kolano's silvery eyes. "My vow is not binding unless your promise is fulfilled."

"Toka has no cause for suspicion—as he shall see."

The great square was near now. Toka narrowly eyed Kolano. "Why didn't Kosanna migrate to the Outer World to escape tribute to Ophid?"

"Kosannans," Kolano educated, "would perish instantly in the elements of the Outer World."

"If you and the Old Ones are so capable," Toka mocked, "why wasn't a spell cast over Ophid and his realm?"

"The present Old Ones are the greatest mentalities Kosanna ever had—but they have their limitations."

The palanquins were born to the foot of the altar, and Kolano bid softly, "I shall rejoin you soon, Toka." She led the Old Ones for the door between the feet of the colossal statue.

Going down the Hall Of Life, Toka noted the scene of his marriage to Kolano had been added to the continuity; his expedition to Ophid and his deeds there; his return to Kosanna; and Roya and the others departing for the Outer World. Yet a good length of the Hall remained bare.

Alota did not lead to his rooms at the end of the Hall, but stopped before a pair of unscened panels on the left. Caring little, Toka sauntered in. There was this luxurious lounge room. Then, through a door scened with entwined hearts and embracing lovers, there was a teasingly scented boudoir.

V

From out of the darkness, thirteen pairs of silvery eyes stared at the Sphere Of All Time. The air was cold and sang with a thin thrumming. The Sphere shone with a pale cold light—the scene was the pit of Ophid. . . .

From a crevice in a massive stalagmite,

a giant Dragon Man was emerging warily. He wore a spiked collar studded with flashing jewels. Slipping away through the haze, he tugged the first door bracing loose and his fellows poured forth in an angry stream. . . .

In the court of the Sphere Of All Time, one pair of silvery eyes departed.

TOKA SAUNTERED BACK TO the lounge room of the bridal suite.

Another door on the right swung softly in and Kolano stepped from a dim passage. "Great Prince Toka finds these rooms satisfactory?"

"So far."

"After we dine, Toka shall be more satisfied."

The scent of her touched into his nostrils.

The main portals were swinging in for a cortege bearing trays of food and drink. The table serviced, Toka and Kolano were left alone. Slender green tapers gave off a delicate odor and the menu was exotic. But there was a platter of leaf-wrapped packs of Sandcliff's water berries, no doubt part of the stores from the raft. Toka felt little appetite but he tore open a pack's corner and spilled his hand full of the black fruit. There was a magic in these berries, a magic to heal all wounds—and to give renewed strength. . . .

He met Kolano's silvery gaze. "You and the Old Ones—unlike the common Kosannans—know I am not of divine origin."

Kolano shrugged. "For ages untold, your coming has been foreseen in the Sphere Of All Time."

"And you and the Old Ones?"

"The Old Ones were born of palace princesses and selected to study for the Council by the Old Ones of their time. I, too, am of a palace princess—and was selected by the present Old Ones to be the mother of your son."

Toka eyed her sardonically. "I don't know if the Sphere Of All Time reported this, but in my part of the Outer World we believe people should love each other first."

"I have loved you since first I saw you in the Sphere." Kolano's silvery eyes were alight for him.

Toka shifted his gaze away. "Perhaps it might be best to wait a while."

"Perhaps Toka needs only to know me better."

Toka stood up and sauntered away. At that moment the main portals swung in for the cortege to clear away the dining service.

As the portals swung shut again, Toka glanced cynically at Kolano. "Everybody knows just when to come and go."

"The Sphere has long told the times of all your needs and actions—past, present and future."

"All right," Toka challenged sardonically, "what am I going to do next?"

"You are going to bed. And I am returning to my private rooms." Touching open the passage door, Kolano departed with a soft smile for him.

He was alone and free—but for a vow. He opened the great portals. The Hall Of Life stretched away vast and deserted. To the continuity had been added the scene of his recent dinner with Kolano.

If he could find where they had those scene stored. . . . But another thought held him. If the future did show Kolano and him as she had intimated. . . .

Toka turned back into the bridal suite. If he was going to get free he would, and if he wasn't. . . .

It was a line of reasoning typically Kosannan!

The ceiling's glowing had dimmed. Toka turned down the silky covers of the great bed.

. . . the smooth whiteness of Kolano's skin . . . the Titian sheen of her hair . . . the deep smouldering in those silvery eyes . . . the curve of those carmine lips . . . the curvedness of—

This was the way he used to think of Roya! Used to think of Roya —

Toka tensed abruptly. Through the dimness he saw the boudoir door slowly move. Who could have gotten into this suite without toppling the chairs he had balanced against the doors? Hand on Battleax, Toka lay motionless—ready to leap. The door moved slowly in.

In the black court, the Sphere Of All Time shone on with a pale cold light. . . .

Ophid's men, boys and dragons were massed around him as he stood atop a huge stalagmite stump. His features were contorted with insane rage, his snaky body

quivering with it. His fanged mouth began to froth. His wild-eyed subjects snapped their heads up and down in approval. Ophid made a sweeping gesture and the fanatical Dragon Men began a frantic search for handy lengths of limestone shards—broken from the mighty columns . . .

THE Big Brown came into view. The flowery jungle spread away, blending into silent shadows as twilight neared.

Rok let his paddle trail. "Well, we're out—thanks to Toka."

The implication pricked Roya. "He didn't have to stay!"

"No," Rok considered sardonically, "Toka didn't have to marry Kolano—so we could get you and Elees out of that pit."

Roya was silent a long moment. "Rok," she commanded, "whistle for that big slick-skin we saw around here the other day!"

Rok's shrill blast cut away. A distant roar drifted back over the jungle. Rok whistled again. The distant roar answered—closer.

"Head for the opposite shore!" Roya commanded.

In moments the canoe was beached on the firm mud. Above the throbbing of the Big Brown came the distant crashing of trees and brush. Rok's whistle split again through the shadowy jungle. Roaring acknowledgement, The Big Snake was now so near the ground quaked with the rhythm of its coming.

Old Ledo was peering into the canoe. "Hey—how did all these packs of berries get under the thwarts?"

"Divide the packs among us," Roya commanded.

The Big Snake burst from a stand of fern trees and tore straight for Roya. With a happy roar it slewed to a ground-gouging stop. Then, missing Toka, it whined plaintively.

Roya held up her clenched left hand, raised its little finger and pointed to Elees. The Big Snake grunted. Roya raised the next finger and pointed to Old Ledo. The next finger was Rok, the next Roya herself. Each time the intently watching Big Snake understood. Roya raised her thumb. The Big Snake whined plaintively.

Roya pointed in the direction of the underground river and sang a snatch of the choral that had enticed them in there. The Big Snake frowned.

Roya held up her right hand and raised and lowered those fingers again and again and gestured that hand toward the underground area. Then she gripped her right hand, representing Kosanna, around her left thumb, representing Toka. She made Toka struggle against Kosanna. The big slick-skin began rumbling deep in its great belly. Its bulging red eyes began burning with rising anger. Its tail and colossal body rippled as it poised to race to Toka's help. Roya shook her head emphatically. The big slick-skin rumbled questioning.

In the deepening twilight, Roya swiftly fingered a design in the smooth mud of the shore. The drawing crudely portrayed the big slick-skin and Roya and friends. It was also a map of the valley and the Big Brown on down to distant Sandcliff and the great dinosaur herd in that area. Roya pointed a finger to the character representing the big slick-skin, then pointed to the monster itself and raised her head and pretended to roar toward Sandcliff. She pointed to the herd around Sandcliff and wriggled her fingers to portray them running up valley to this spot.

The Big Snake instantly whipped its head aloft and faced down valley. It yawned its cavernous mouth and blasted the darkening twilight with a roaring that slammed away and back and away again in echo. Quickly there was an answering roar from far down valley. The big slick-skin instantly blasted away another series of mighty roars. At once the Big Snake far down valley acknowledged and relayed the imperative message on. And even farther down valley a third Big Snake began blasting the purple night with that peculiar series of mighty roars. And the call to the Big Snakes was flashing down the valley and summoning the colossal monsters to the rescue!

"Why not pile aboard old slicky here," Rok urged, "and start the fun now!"

"Those flesh-eating fish in that river would cut him down in moments," Roya explained.

"But the other Big Snakes can't get here till dawn!" Rok protested.

"We'll camp on that butte." Roya gestured the big slick-skin to kneel.

From atop that butte, the whole valley radiated away in starlit beauty. Sitting on the dewy grass, Roya ripped open a leaf-wrapped pack. The others joined in. The big slick-skin stood guard.

In the black court, the twelve pairs of silvery eyes stared on into the coldly shining Sphere Of All Time. . . .

Armed with great clubs of broken limestone, the hordes of Ophid were straddling aboard the multitude of dragons that had stretched out full length. Ophid leaped astride the neck of the largest. Flapping its many sets of great wings, the dragon rose its sinuous lengths up through the haze and shot for the tunnel. The other dragons and their wildly eager riders swarmed after. Into the gloom of the tunnel tore Ophid's lead dragon and burst into the weird outer area. Without pause Ophid sawing his swarm over the river and tore up-stream. Into the gloom of that vast cavern the wild Dragon Men and their mad monsters poured. . . .

IN THE DIMNESS Toka watched the boudoir door ease slowly open. Framed by soft and loose titian hair, a white oval of features peered slowly around the door.

The low insinuation was Kolano's. "Toka is not sleeping, either?"

He was on his feet. "No."

Kolano's only jewelry was that wedding ring, her only attire a sheer silver gown that swirled provocatively about her sleek legginess as she idled toward Toka. She was smiling up at him, her silvery eyes smouldering with desire. The enticing scent of her stole into his nostrils.

He stood indecisively. "How did you get in?"

Her smooth white arms slipped around his neck. Her delicately scented breath was warm on his face. "Not all doors look like doors, Toka."

Her voluptuous softness and firmnesses were thrilling his own naked torso. His fingers spread onto the smooth nudity of her back.

Her deep contralto was intimately low. "Toka does not mind?"

"Not too much—yet." Her arms were tightening about his neck. Her sleek full-

ness was resting so closely to him he could feel her throbbing with expectancy. Her legginess pressed through her gossamer gowning to thrill his thighs. His own heart raced with the desire forming in him.

With a woman's want, Kolano's silvery eyes held his. "Toka is happy."

"Do you think so?"

Her lips brushed along his cheek to his ear. "I can feel it so."

Her warm lips found his mouth and the thrill raced through Toka. Kolano possessed him until his senses reeled as in a wild dream. Kolano's lips moved thrillingly on his and wanted more of him—in-satiably more! He felt his last resistance going down—until his deepest emotions were bursting free and beginning to clamor for more of Kolano—more!

A frantic gonging split through Toka's passionate senses. He broke free of Kolano and read the answer in her suddenly haggard features—the Dragon Men were winging for Kosanna! The vision of Roya flooded back into Toka's mind. But Roya was gone forever—was disgusted with him! And without Roya what was life! Toka whirled for his battle-ax.

Kolano's contralto rang low, "O Great Prince Toka! This is the hour—use it well!"

Great battle-ax swinging, Toka was into the lounge room. The ceilings were coming aglow. The new day of Kosanna was dawning—and the last day of Toka was setting. Racing up the deserted Hall Of Life, he spared a swift glance for the portrayal of that recent episode in the boudoir. They'd have another scene soon! Toka was slamming open the huge entry portals.

The gonging silenced. Kosanna spread away below—deserted. Toka was alone atop the sacred stairway. Fighting being surging with terrible power, he poised with his battle-ax a whistling blur around his head. And from that down-river cavern shot Ophid—astride the neck of a monstrous dragon. Out streaked more, at least half a hundred—lines of wild Dragon Men riding each one.

Ophid's lead dragon streaked in low over the city. The swarm behind spread out and the dragons landed in the avenues. Their riders leaped off and began flailing their wicked clubs to Kosanna's

buildings—cracking the spheroid structures and smashing in the doors. Hissing and rattling angrily, the dragons were taking to the air again to whip their tails around other buildings and tumble them down with terrible crashings to destroy their occupants.

But here and there the hitherto docile Kosannans were snatching up knives, sharp tools—anything to try to fight with! The rattlings and flappings, the hissings and shoutings, the yelling and screaming, the explosive crashing of stone on stone and the grinding agony of collapsing structures filled Kosanna and slammed into the ears.

But Ophid and a flight of ten dragons and their riders converged on Toka. The dragons raced to landings on the great stairway. Their insane riders leaped clear. The eleven dragons surged again to the air to come hurtling in for Toka as the horde of Dragon Men came flooding up the great stairway. Toka backed into the concavity of the palace entrance.

The first dragon shot in with great yellow fangs dripping with glistening venom. Toka's ax leaped and bit true to split that flat skull and send the horror crashing in wild convulsions onto the Dragon Men. It was no deterrent. More flying monsters were hurtling in with red tongues flicking and huge fangs dripping.

The Dragon Men had gained the stair top now and were rushing for Toka. With terrible strength and blinding speed Toka powered his mighty battle-ax in screaming drives. Again and again fangs cracked away and venom sprayed. Over and over skulls were split and brains showered wide. Reptilian bodies were cut twain and blood flew as in a rain. The terrace ran red and was slippery with warm gore.

Toka fought on with the increasing recklessness of a warrior who only wants to sell his life for the highest price! And Ophid was a crazed demon standing atop the massive balustrade and ranting for the destruction of Kosanna!

They came swarming up the gore-drenched stairway, came streaking through the sound-torn air and were an insane flood raging to inundate this lone warrior of the Outer World. In but gory split moments the price of Toka would soon be paid!

VI

DAWN BROKE GRAY AND RED in the east and grew to gold as the new sun soared free. But Roya's anxious eyes only stared away into the west.

"Hear it!" Rok cried suddenly.

It was like the rolling, rolling, rolling of distant thunder coming steadily out of the west. The big slick-skin whipped its huge head aloft to blast a mighty roar down the valley. Faint and clear the answer came—a chorus of roaring.

Standing on tiptoe and straining to see, Roya felt the tingles racing through her. "See them coming!"

Far down valley, the monsters were a river of colossal power. They were in many colorings and mottlings, in many forms and sizes—all tearing for this butte. Great trees were mown down like blades of grass before the powerfully racing leaders. Swamps and rivers were as nothing. There was no stopping them—no slowing them. They had heard their human master needed them! They were coming—to the last one!

And now the thundering of their swift coming filled the air and shook the very earth till a person could scarcely stand erect. It swayed the mightiest trees as in a gale. The roaring for battle slammed into the sense, took the breath and beat upon the body. And the grassy butte was swarming with the terrible colossi. Towering above Roya, a mighty armor-plated spike-back rumbled for directions.

Gesturing to the big slick-skin she had been carefully educating during the night, Roya pointed to the black-back and worked her mouth as if talking. The slick-skin began rumbling to the black leader. Instantly facing his impatient fellows massed on the slopes, the black spike-back reared up and began gesturing his huge forelimbs as he roared at them. Anger mounting even higher, the Big Snakes roared to be off for Toka.

At that moment a frantic gonging came faint but clear from the direction of the entrance to Kosanna. Rok instantly deduced the cause. "The Dragon Men must be attacking Kosanna!"

Gesturing the black leader to kneel, Roya was aboard the massive back, one hand cluthing to a spike for support. Elees and the men were with her and Roya's

voice rang on the jungle air. "Go for Toka!"

The colossus heaved up running. Down the slope it tore with a battle roar. With a combined roaring that filled the air with deafening thunder the mass of Big Snakes swarmed in behind—all the armorplated ones first. Through the dense jungle as though it were grass the colossal black leader tore the way. He burst clear and shot across the Big Brown in a geysering spray to plunge into the luminous cavern.

The angrily roaring monster's huge head was stretched out low over the deep water—and Roya saw the vicious fish were not present! But the armored monster, as did the others close behind, beat the water to colored foam.

The monstrous spike-back raced around another bend and tore for that grill of green columns—but that massive structure was drawn into the vaulted roof! There was nothing to impede the way!

"Listen to the sounds from Kosanna!" Elees cried.

"The fight's on!" Rok yelled in helpless anxiety.

"Oh, Toka!" Roya prayed.

"Here we come!" Old Ledo chanted.

The cavern opened into Kosanna. The angrily roaring spikeback burst clear and the wild battling spread away in all its detail.

Roya's heart was in her cry. "There's Toka—fighting in the palace entry!"

With a roaring that blasted through the wild din of battle the black colossus was already tearing for Toka. The mass of following Big Snakes swept into the city with a vengeance.

SCREAMING Dragon Men and their hissing and rattling monsters were a flood trying to down Toka by sheer weight of numbers. The insane Ophid stood on the massive balustrade and urged his crazed subjects on. Toka stood in the concavity of the palace entry and drove his battle-ax with blinding speed. Jagged clubs were as little deterrent to his mighty weapon as were the slimy bodies of the frothing monstrosities that wielded them. But on they and their huge dragons came. And in but another moment. . . .

A mighty roaring suddenly cut through the battle din. Toka spared an instant's

glance. The familiar black bulk of an armorplated Big Snake burst from the up-river cavern and tore into Kosanna!

Perched gracefully atop that spiked back was Roya!

Rok and the others were with her—battle-axes swinging. More Big Snakes thundered into Kosanna—more—roaring viciously and already battling the hordes of Ophid.

But Roya was coming—leading the attack! She still loved him! The exultation surged through Toka. And to his superb strength and speed was added this toxin to drive him to greater fury of a different nature.

Down in Kosanna, Ophid's men and dragons were locked in raging battle with the colossal Big Snakes. Those jagged clubs were as nothing. But those long yellow fangs of Ophid's men and their dragons—the venom they injected as they bit home on unarmored Big Snake anatomy! The ferociously fighting slick-skins dropped in their tracks and sprawled in utter limpness—then immediately began bloating till their colossal bodies burst in a gory explosion!

But the viciously battling armor-plates were impervious to those striking fangs. They trampled Ophid's men and slammed them to lifeless smears. They caught the flying dragons and ripped the writhing, hissing and striking things to shreds.

The terrace began heaving violently beneath Toka's feet and the colossal black leader with Roya aboard loomed up and exploded into this insane melee. Dragon Men and flying monsters and colossal armor-plated heads and tails whirled in wild battle. The ravenously screaming battle-axes of Rok and Old Ledo—of Roya and Elees—joined Toka's in this desperate finale.

But Toka's fighting heart was abruptly clutched in an icy grip as a club cracked to Roya's ax arm! She dropped her weapon. Red eyes blazing, Ophid leaped atop the black spike-back's neck and was scrambling recklessly up the viciously lashing length. Rok and Old Leo were desperately occupied with flying monsters. Elees did not see. Yellow fangs dripping venom, Ophid was nearly to Roya now. And she dare not jump—a sea of wildly fighting Dragon Men awaited.

With a fervent prayer Toka snatched at his waist. His arm whipped and his great battle knife streaked away.

But that moment had its price—a pair of fangs sank into Toka's leg. Even as his ravenous knife blade sang through the Dragon Man's neck Toka's scsnes reeled. His last memory was of Roya screaming, "Toka!"

TOKA'S mind fought harder and slowly made his weary body come alive, made it want to struggle back there—to Roya. The blackness slowly fell away and Toka looked up into Roya's deep blue eyes. Her lips were warm and sweet.

"Brother!" Rok was observing fervently. "Was that close!"

"One less berry," Old Ledro reflected sagely, "and that venom would have been too much." Indeed, the black fruit had once again demonstrated its healing power.

"No Roya and there would be no anything now," Elees was pointing evenly.

"The Sphere Of All Time," Kolano was assuring easily, "is never wrong."

As Roya drew up from him, Toka sat up. He was on the bed in the bridal suite. The gore-spattered Roya and Elees, Rok and Old Ledro, the sheerly clad Kolano and the black-robed Old Ones, were all circled about him.

Roya faced Kolano. "I don't know whether your Sphere Of All Time is ever wrong or not, but I know your marriage to Toka is not honest." She held her battle-ax ready.

Kolano smiled softly. "And so, Roya, you'll kill me if you can—to free your Toka."

Kolano's knowledge momentarily disconcerted Roya—and Toka.

"But I am freeing Toka," Kolano mused in intimate memory. "Now that the element of Toka is in me."

Touching a chair for support, Roya stared starkly at Toka.

Toka leaped from the bed and drilled his angry gaze at Kolano. "That isn't true and you know it!"

"Toka, Roya—please," Kolano smiled. "It is true—but not the way you think."

"I think," Toka warned levelly, "we'd better have a few explanations."

"When Toka and I kissed last night,"

Kolano explained sincerely, "his spirit—the spirit of a mighty warrior of the Outer World—mingled with my spirit and left something of that warrior spirit in me." She gazed frankly at Roya. "And that is all it was—purely spiritual."

Toka met Roya's relieved gaze.

"So," Kolano continued quietly, "when I next wed one of the men of Kosanna—one who found the spirit to do battle against the hordes of Ophid—our sons shall be worthy of becoming Kosanna's new leaders."

Toka held Kolano's eyes. "What about this marriage of ours?"

Kolano quietly held his gaze. "It is time to proceed to the altar—that our marriage may be dissolved."

The cortege forming the entire party marched for the Hall Of Life—where the final victory over the hordes of Ophid was portrayed in huge scenes. But there remained space there still for many more scenes.

Going down the sacred stairway, Toka glanced to Kolano. "How about the hordes of Ophid?"

"There are no men of Ophid or dragons left alive," Kolano assured.

All Kosanna looking on silently, Toka and Kolano stood on the fore edge of the altar below the gigantic statue of him and, to the anciently quavering chant of the Old Ones, removed each other's ring and placed the brilliant bands on the pillows.

Kolano's smile was unsteady, her silvery eyes misty. "Great Prince Toka and his friends shall be forever revered by Kosanna."

Toka quietly voiced his sincere wish. "May peace dwell forevermore in Kosanna."

As Kosanna broke into beautiful choral-ing, Toka beckoned to his black spike-back. Mounting the great creature with Roya and the others of his party, Toka headed down the main avenue. The surviving Big Snakes fell in behind with happy eyes and peaceful features. Meeting Roya's eyes, Toka pressed her hand in gentle expression of his feeling. He thrilled as Roya returned the pressure.

The up-river cayern yawned to receive them and the Outer World waited.



Goma gave a scream of terrible agony.

GOMA'S FOLLICLES

By JOHN and DOROTHY de COURCY

Illustrated by MARTIN

New planets—new conditions . . . unforeseeable, difficult and dangerous to overcome. Granted. Still, who'd have thought getting a haircut on Procyon IV could be a matter of life and death?

THE *FRANKLIN* WAS the newest and best ship of the Morgan Interstellar Transportation Corporation. It was plain from the Captain's pouter-pigeon stance that he too was aware of this fact. The only jarring note in Captain Webster's mind was the unscheduled stop at Procyon IV. He glanced again at the yellow blank in his hand, his lips moving slightly as he re-read it.

"Captain Webster, Commanding *S. S. Franklin*, enroute to earth. Make contact with Procyon IV. Passenger for earth waiting at Iridium City. Necessary time will be allowed on your schedule. Chief Dispatcher."

Captain Webster crumpled the message into a ball and threw it on the floor.

"Whistle stop!" he growled. His anger was motivated by the fact that he had hoped to set a new record with the *Franklin* and the last thing he desired was time added to his schedule. "If he isn't ready and waiting when we land," the Captain muttered, "he can walk to earth!"

The *Franklin* came out of sub-space drive. The navigator had no difficulty finding Procyon's fourth planet, but it took much studious peering to find the tiny earth colony. It turned out to be a dot about three miles in diameter, a mining settlement. In a few minutes, the giant ship

settled gently into a rickety landing cradle. A spaceman pressed the unlocking studs and the passenger port opened with a hiss. The gangway slid neatly out and made contact with the shaky steps.

With obvious distaste, Captain Webster gathered his dignity about him like a cloak and started across the gangway. His feet had no more than touched the plastic tread when he stopped abruptly. A wild apparition came charging up the stairway, long, unkempt hair streaming in the wind. Down the gangway it ran and propelled the Captain violently backward into his ship.

Puffing and gasping for air, the Captain half lay in the arms of two spacemen who had caught him just before he reached the decking. Nothing of what the Captain said was understandable except the word "outrage" which he repeated often and vigorously.

"Now, now, now, please Captain," the long haired apparition pleaded. "Compose yourself. Don't get excited. I can explain everything. I'm Mr. Thurwinker of the Office of Colonial Development."

"Oh, oh," the Captain grunted. "The OCD, huh?" His anger evaporated and he struggled to his feet trying to look dignified again. "Well—I'm sure—ah—that is—no doubt you have a good reason for your actions, sir—ah—"

"Oh yes, indeed," Mr. Thurwinker replied, hastily, "but I can't stop now. I must impress on you, Captain, the urgency of your ship leaving as soon as possible. Yes, yes it's imperative! And you must remain out of sight. Don't show yourselves under any circumstances! I'll get your passenger now." Without another word, Mr. Thurwinker scurried out of the ship. He turned at the end of the gangway. "Remember Captain, don't let anyone see you. Keep out of sight. Yes indeed, out of sight!"

The open-mouthed Captain watched the OCD man scramble down the steps and reappear a moment later carrying a suitcase. He was followed by another man whose hair was also streaming down over his shoulders. The Captain's mouth sagged open an additional half-inch as the strange looking pair entered the ship.

Mr. Thurwinker set the bag down and

shook hands with his companion. "Good-bye, Mr. Purcell. Have a nice trip home. We all regret seeing you go, yes indeed, regret it very much." He darted out of the ship for the second time. At the end of the gangway, he turned to face the Captain. "Oh yes, Captain. I must tell you! It's imperative—"

"I know!" the Captain roared. "And don't worry, Mr. Thurwinker! We're leaving this asylum immediately!"

Mr. Thurwinker jumped off the gangway as it began to roll into the big ship. He waved cheerily to his friend just before the port closed. The *Franklin* began to lift almost at once.

SAM PURCELL brushed his hair out of his face and extended a friendly hand to the Captain. "How do you do, Captain. I'm Sam Purcell, your new passenger."

Captain Webster stared at the outstretched hand as though it were a specimen from an anatomical laboratory. "Procyon IV's gain is my loss!" he snarled.

As the Captain stomped away, Sam turned his hand over to see if anything was wrong with it. "Unfriendly cuss," he observed to the spaceman beside him.

The spaceman smiled. "Just be thankful he isn't your boss."

Sam nodded. "I see what you mean," he replied.

"Shall I take your bag to your stateroom?" the spaceman asked.

"I'd be much obliged," Sam answered. "Is there a barber on this tub? I want to get rid of this mop as soon as I can."

"Yes sir," the spaceman said. "But wouldn't you like to go to your cabin first?"

Sam smiled. "No, I've been dreaming about this haircut for ages. Just tell me where my cabin is and take me to the barber shop!"

The spaceman nodded and picked up Sam's bag. Sam followed him down the companionway to the barber shop.

"Your stateroom is L-14, sir," the spaceman said. "It's the last cabin on the left at the end of this companionway."

"Thank you," Sam replied as he stepped into the shop.

The barber closed the book he was reading and jumped up. "Yes sir. What can—"

He broke off in mid-sentence and gawked stupidly.

"I don't want a manicure," Sam chuckled as he slid into the chair.

The barber smiled sickly. "Ah—no, of course not," he agreed. He busied himself bundling Sam up in a transparent apron and then stepped back to view his client artistically. "Shall—I take—a little off the top?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Cut it off!" Sam snorted. "I want to look human again!"

The barber set to work chopping off great chunks of hair. Several times he opened his mouth to say something but the situation seemed to him beyond the range of normal conversation.

"I bet you're wondering how I got like this," Sam chuckled.

"Why—yes," the barber murmured. "That thought did occur to me. Ah—I don't suppose—ah—there are many barbers where you come from."

"That's the funny part of it," Sam replied. "We used to have a barber, a darn good one, too. Yup, he was one of the best in the business. I guess that was Roy's trouble. He was too good."

"But—but—how?" the barber interrupted.

"The hair?" Sam asked. "I was coming to that. It all started three years ago when we first landed on Procyon IV. A meteorite had plowed in there some time in the past and that was what were after. The original survey had found fragments of nearly pure iridium in a crater and you know how hard that stuff is to get. The survey figured that the whole meteorite was composed of iridium and, as it turned out, they were right."

"Mr. Thurwinker, the government agent," Sam continued, "started out right away dickering with the natives. It wasn't too hard to do cause they look a lot like us, considering what most of the inhabitants of other planets look like. Anyway, Thurwinker traded off half a ship load of gew-gaws and we got the crater.

"Our supplies started coming in and on the first ship was Roy, the barber. We built up a little town, the typical mining settlement, and got things pretty much underway. It took us about two months to get our soundings all lined up and then we found that the meteorite had struck

the planet at quite an angle. It hadn't gone too far down but it had gone so far to one side that the thing was completely outside the crater. Mr. Thurwinker tried to bargain with the natives for the ground directly over the meteorite, but he didn't get very far. They didn't like him much and I can't say as I blame them. The natives let him know that they wanted to be left alone so we stayed in our little town.

"Well, there wasn't much of anything to do, so most of us just sat around, waiting for Thurwinker to make some kind of a bargain. He finally persuaded the Chief of the natives to talk the situation over with him."

GOMA growled deeply in his barrel chest. "You have land. Why want you more?"

Thurwinker hesitated, trying to phrase the proper answer in Goma's language. "This land not good," he said, pointing to the crater. Then turning, "this land, good. We want good land."

"You cannot have land," Goma replied with classic simplicity.

"I gave you many things for bad land," Thurwinker answered. "I will give you more for good land."

"I not want things," Goma stated. "I keep land."

Thurwinker reverted to English. "My stars! How does the government expect me to bargain with creatures like this! Sometimes I think I was better off in the office. Yes indeed, much better off."

Goma regarded him with a unwinking stare. "You make noise like infant."

Thurwinker's lips compressed a little. "You give us land. We make you Big Chief. Chief of all you see."

"I am now Chief of all I see," Goma said.

Thurwinker made several more suggestions without any sign of success.

Goma stood up. "I go now," he announced.

"But, Chief!" Thurwinker protested.

Goma brushed him aside and strode out of the hut. He was joined by his retinue which closed in about him, rudely shoving Thurwinker to one side. In silence, the procession marched up the street, apparently ignoring everything. They were near-

ly past Roy's barber shop when one of the natives let out a screech and froze with one foot slightly off the ground. The others turned to look through the barber shop window and, as they did, emitted groans, yelps and gasps.

Roy stopped his cutting and looked at the natives. He studied them for a moment and then went back to snipping his customer's hair. As the scissors closed on a lock of hair, a simultaneous groan went up from the assembled natives. The expressions of horror became more and more intense as the man's hair fell to the floor in little tufts. A tall, muscular native quietly fainted. None of the others paid any attention to him. Their eyes were riveted in terrible fascination on the gleaming shears.

Soon the man stepped out of the barber chair and smiled at Roy as he slipped on his jacket. He stopped at the door and stared at the natives curiously. They fell back as he approached and a low mutter ran through the group.

Thurwinker had drifted up sometime during the performance and stood scratching his head. The man looked at Thurwinker with a puzzled frown. "What are they doing here?" he asked.

Thurwinker shrugged. "I don't know." Low mumbling ran through the group of natives.

"What are they saying?" the man asked.

"They say you are very brave," Thurwinker replied. "They seem to think you're a big hero."

The man shook his head and walked away bewildered.

Thurwinker turned back to the natives and all of them were looking at Goma. Goma glanced from face to face, fingering his shoulder length hair. He shuddered and looked pleadingly at the others. Faint lines of what Thurwinker thought was disgust began to appear on the group of faces.

Thurwinker smiled suddenly. "I think I know what they want," he mumbled to himself. "Chief," he called. "You want—" He paused trying to find the words. Then taking a piece of his own hair, he made cutting motions with his fingers.

Goma's beady eyes dilated and he shook visibly.

"Come," Thurwinker urged, opening the barber shop door.

Hesitantly, Goma took a step forward. "Come," Thurwinker urged again. "It won't hurt." He pointed to himself and asked, "I go first?"

"No!" Goma roared. He thrust Thurwinker aside and galloped to the barber chair. Roy looked questioningly at Thurwinker.

"It's all right," Thurwinker grinned. "Go ahead. This will put them at ease. Maybe this is just the thing we've been looking for. Yes indeed, just the thing. But be careful, Roy. Yes, yes, very careful."

ROY nodded and tried to run a comb through the Chief's matted hair. Each time Goma was touched, he shivered. The other natives watched through the window and shook whenever Goma did. Roy isolated a small section of hair and placing his scissors against the comb, he snipped it off. With a scream of terrible agony, Goma's body convulsed in the chair. He leaped upright, holding his head with one hand while he looked wildly about.

Roy started over to Goma to remove the apron but Goma backed away holding his hands before him as if to ward off a blow. Then he burst through the door and out into the street, running as though the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels. He didn't stop until he reached the brush at the edge of the crater.

The other natives watched him go with disgust. Two of them picked up rocks and threw them after the retreating figure. When Goma was at last out of sight, they assembled themselves in a group again and marched out of town.

Thurwinker watched the procession diminish in the distance. "Well, that's that," he muttered. He turned on Roy. "I told you to be careful!"

"I *was* careful!" Roy protested.

"Apparently you weren't careful enough!" Thurwinker snapped. "I don't know what you did to him, but you sure fixed our chances for getting any land."

"But I tell you I didn't do anything, Mr. Thurwinker," Roy answered hotly. "I hardly even touched him!"

"Well, if I were you, I'd cultivate a lighter touch!" Thurwinker cracked and, without waiting for Roy to reply, he turned and walked out of the shop.

During the next hour, Thurwinker com-



posed twenty-six messages to send back home explaining his failure. Twenty-six messages had been thrown in the wastebasket as unsatisfactory. There really wasn't anything to say. He knew that none of his excuses would be accepted. He was a failure and so he wrote out his resignation. It was a foregone conclusion that the Colonial Office would want it. Thurwinker groaned. He could see himself being held up before the students in the OCD schools as the horrible example.

He was halfway through with what was to be message number twenty-seven when the door opened quietly. Goma stepped in and walked unheard over to Thurwinker's desk.

"I Goma," he mumbled.

"Yaaaaaaaah!" Thurwinker let out a whoop and leaped to the top of his desk, quite convinced that Goma had come to destroy him. "Now, now, Chief. Ah—you and I are friends!"

Goma looked at him. "I am not Chief. I am called old female." He looked away from the amazed Thurwinker and sagged into a chair.

"What's the matter, Chief?" Thurwinker asked, climbing down off his desk.

"I am not Chief," Goma replied. "I will be Chief again soon when I . . ." Goma paused and made cutting motions with his fingers.

"You mean, when you get a haircut?" Thurwinker asked.

Goma shivered and said in a small voice, "Yes."

A crafty light came into Thurwinker's eyes. They bargained for half an hour at the end of which time Goma agreed to

give up a very small plot of ground in addition to the crater. It wasn't much, but it was something and Thurwinker accepted.

They arose and walked silently out of the hut. The miners gave the pair curious glances as they strolled up the street. When they reached the barber shop, they found a crowd of natives numbering about one hundred, men, women and children. Goma drew up in front of them imperiously. He stared at them for a full minute and then struck his shoulder with a closed fist in a gesture of bravado. The crowd watched him as he marched up to the barber chair and sat down.

Goma turned to Roy and held up his hand making the cutting motion.

Roy looked at Thurwinker. "Is it all right?"

"Yes, yes indeed! The Chief isn't afraid any more. Go ahead, Roy, but be careful. Yes indeed, very careful!"

Roy cautiously combed out a few strands of hair and holding them gingerly in his hand, he snipped. A groan escaped from between Goma's clenched teeth. Roy hesitated but Goma held up his hand again, making cutting motions. Roy selected a few more strands of hair. As he cut, Goma's breath hissed in sharply and his hands clutched the sides of the chair. On the third cut, Goma's body relaxed and his eyes closed.

Thurwinker rushed to his side. He looked at him for a minute and then ran to the door. "Quick," he said to one of the miners. "Get Dr. Bowen!"

The natives outside began to mutter angrily. Thurwinker dashed back to the barber chair. "Go ahead," he hissed. "Keep cutting! Don't let the natives think anything's gone wrong!"

By the time Dr. Bowen arrived, Goma's hair was neatly trimmed. The Chief was still apparently unconscious and breathing heavily. Dr. Bowen made a hasty examination and then straightened smiling. "It's all right," he said to Thurwinker. "He's only fainted."

THURWINKER heaved a sigh. In a few minutes, Dr. Bowen brought Goma back to consciousness. The Chief stood up but his legs were a little shaky. Shoving away the helping hands, he reeled

toward the open doorway. The native stepped back with looks of awe and reverence. With pride, Goma strode away, the natives following at his heels like obedient and worshipful dogs.

"Now, Thurwinker," Dr. Bowen said, "what's this all about?"

Thurwinker explained the situation while Dr. Bowen listened intently.

"That's funny," the doctor muttered. "He didn't look like much of a coward to me."

"Well, you have to watch these natives carefully," Thurwinker babbled. "You never know what they're going to do next. Goma insisted on getting a haircut and I thought it was a good opportunity to get the land we need."

The doctor stirred a tuft of Goma's hair with the toe of his boot. "Just the same, Thurwinker, you may get into trouble over this. We want that land, but not if there's a war. You know what the Colonial Office would say if trouble started." The doctor bent over and picked up the bit of hair. "Hmmm, I wonder if this could be the reason."

"Reason for what?" Thurwinker asked.

"I don't know," Dr. Bowen replied, "but I'll make some tests." He dropped the hair into his bag. "If I find out anything, I'll let you know," he called as he started for the door, "and I advise you, Thurwinker, to stay out of trouble."

Thurwinker nearly wore a groove in the floor with his pacing. He was a nervous wreck by the time Dr. Bowen arrived. He practically jumped on him as he came in the door. "Now, doctor! What have you been doing? What kind of tests were you talking about and why all this mystery?"

"Calm down, Thurwinker," Dr. Bowen soothed. "There isn't any mystery—at least, not any more."

"What do you mean?" Thurwinker demanded.

"I mean, you've been misled by the appearance of the natives. They look like us except for that light orange color, but they've got at least one fundamental difference. That stuff on their heads isn't exactly hair."

"What!" Thurwinker exploded. "What is it, then? It looks like hair!"

"Under the microscope, there's quite a difference," Dr. Bowen explained. "It has



a hard covering just like our hair, the center is hollow and contains a little fluid, but floating in this fluid is a nerve."

"A what!"

"A nerve," the doctor answered, "just like in our teeth. I rather imagine their hair is some kind of a sensory organ. I don't know what kind, but I'm sending a sample back home and maybe they can find out."

Thurwinker was stunned. "You mean—it hurts—to have their hair cut?"

"It's just like pulling teeth," Bowen chuckled, "without an anesthetic!"

"Oh, no!" Thurwinker groaned. "What have I done!" He paced the floor again and stopped suddenly. "Still, we've got some land to work with. Yes, maybe it'll be all right after all."

But it wasn't all right. The engineers informed Thurwinker that they had to have more shafts. "You just can't drill through iridium!" they complained.

Thurwinker shrugged his shoulders and resolutely set off to find Goma, but Goma had disappeared and none of the natives knew where he had gone. It was useless to try to bargain with them. Because of his haircut, Goma was absolute Chief now. Thurwinker came back to the crater after fruitlessly searching the surrounding country for six days. He opened the door of his hut and plunked himself resignedly down at his desk.

At that moment there came a thump on the door. Thurwinker arose and opened it. There stood Goma looking more down in the mouth than the last time he had visited Thurwinker. Thurwinker stuffed the resignation into his pocket and guided

Goma into the hut. "I am glad to see you, Goma!" Thurwinker exploded. "Yes indeed, very glad."

Goma didn't understand the words, but he knew from the expression on Thurwinker's face that he was welcome.

"I want to see you," Thurwinker began in Goma's tongue. "I want more land."

Goma stared at him sadly. "I keep land. You bad man."

"Huh?" Thurwinker asked, incredulously.

"Look." Goma pointed to his hair. "It grow. When the people see it grow they will not let me be Chief any more."

"You mean—you want another—"

"No!" Goma roared. He shuddered. "Not want haircut!"

"Well, what *do* you want, Chief?" Thurwinker asked, puzzled.

"I am Chief. I am brave. Bad man hurt me. People say I am not brave. I am not Chief any more. I am brave. I let bad man torture me. I am Big Chief." Again he pointed to his hair. "It grow. People soon see it grow and I will not be Chief unless I get haircut again."

"Oh," Thurwinker nodded. "When your hairs grows out you'll have to get another haircut or you won't be Chief. Is that it?"

"Yes," Goma mumbled. There was a silence. Then Goma asked, "Other—people—cut hair?"

"No," Thurwinker informed. "Just bar-ber."

"Bar-ber." Goma turned the unfamiliar word around on his tongue. "Bar-ber. I will fix," he grunted. "I kill bar-ber." He arose and started for the door.

"No, no, no! Wait, wait!" Thurwinker jumped to block Goma's way. After much persuasion, he got Goma back into his chair again. "Big Chief," he said, slowly. "You are right. Bar-ber is very bad man."

It was obvious that Goma agreed. "I kill?" he suggested, hopefully.

"No, no," Thurwinker replied, craftily. "You can not kill."

This puzzled Goma. "I can not kill?" he asked.

"No. Bar-ber would cut hair."

Goma closed his eyes and shook. "I can not kill," he agreed.

"Maybe bar-ber go away?" Thurwinker suggested. "Far away?"

Goma's eyes brightened. "You can make bar-ber go away?"

"Yes," Thurwinker said, triumphantly. "If you give land, I make bar-ber go away."

"Other bar-ber come?" Goma asked.

"No."

"Bar-ber go away. No more cut hair. I will still be Big Chief, but will not have hair cut. I will give land." Goma arose and marched out of the hut. He was his old, imperial self again.

THE ship's barber whipped the apron off Sam Purcell. "There, I cut hair. I mean, it's all done."

Sam glanced in a mirror. "Yup, and a good job too." He stood up and reached for his jacket. "Well, that's about all there was to the affair," Sam continued. "Thurwinker let the word leak out to the natives that Goma had captured Roy. This made Goma a bigger hero than ever. We marched Roy down to the first transport that came in as if he was a prisoner and kept our guns ready until they took off just to impress the natives. Of course, we had to let our hair grow but we got the iridium and that's what we were after. Just as long as the natives don't see anyone with a haircut, everything will be fine."

The barber laughed. "I wouldn't have believed your story if I hadn't seen your hair."

As Sam prepared to go, Captain Webster entered the barber shop and stared at Sam. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" he asked.

"Maybe," Sam admitted with a hostile stare. "I'm one of your passengers, if that'll help you any."

"Of course," Captain Webster chuckled. "I don't believe I got your name, though."

"Purcell," Sam replied. "Sam Purcell."

"Well, well!" Captain Webster replied, jovially. "I'm certainly glad to meet you, Mr. Purcell. Webster's the name." He extended a plump hand to Sam.

Sam looked at the hand as though it were slightly decayed and walked out.

TASK OF TAU

By J. Harvey Haggard



Tau tore him to pieces.

Tau was metal. Tau was chemical. Tau was electrical. Yet Tau could face death like a man.

A GLEAMING BINARY SWUNG in the blue sky, sending a moist warmth across the swaying fern-growths of the *Fourteenth Planet*. Feathered creatures of bright colors flashed through the underbrush and made noises there. A figure came stalking down through the shaded clearings, and small scaly bodies scurried out of sight, leaving ungainly tracks scrawled in the swamp mud.

Tau, the metal man, a mechanical half-sentient messenger from the far distant past, strode impassively along, not heeding the smaller creatures of the jungle. He had sighted the tiny habitable world from the distant depths of an outer galaxy, and had

moored his space-ship in a clearing that was not distant.

He halted his berylite six-foot body in a leafy glade and let the wind play about his cold outer surface. The lens-cased inscrutable orbs in his head peered about, taking in the scene with photographic detail.

"Life! This is life!" he thought to himself. "This is the life the Master said I would find some day."

Though his memories were of a distant past, of a remote planet, and of the Master whose atoms might lie even now in the etheric dust, Tau remembered with perfect clarity. He could recall the aged countenance of the Master, the broad forehead,

the jutting chin, and the determined undertone of his deep voice.

"Men may die," the Master had said, "but their deeds live after them." And Kendall Smith's face had lighted inwardly as though from some deep inspiration. Tau had said nothing in reply, but in the neuro-chemical mechanisms of his brain the words had been imprinted forever.

"You're just a robot," the master had said, "with responses and reactions that are the involuntary activations of metal and chemical-change impulse, yet I believe that some day in the aeons which will pass, you will learn to reason for yourself to some extent, and perhaps understand your mission. But you will never live, even though you may carry the germs of life into the far distant future."

And now Tau, standing in the mire of that world of the future he had talked about, wondered at the mystery which was called Life, and doubted if he clearly understood what the Master had meant. One thing he knew certainly, that his metallic body was meant to bridge the epoch which yawned between the life-lines of the past and those of the future. Old Kendall Smith, stalking back and forth in his laboratory, had explained as much, and Tau had never forgotten.

"Our life-line is narrowing, the earth is dying," the Master had explained. "That one-in-a-million chance of opportune conditions in which life may exist is vanishing. I doubt if the circumstances can be duplicated in the entire universe. But someday, by the very laws which govern chance, they must return again. It is not within the powers of man to bridge the gap of space and time, but you, Tau, the robot, swinging in the non-conducting realms of the vacuum of space, will be next to eternal."

Tau had learned the secrets of extracting radiant energy from the atom, had become adept in applying the forces to the mechanisms that propelled the space-ship and supplied motivation for his own metal body. Many other secrets the Master had taught him in the laboratories, and he had come to know the uses of the scientific paraphernalia that was sealed in the inner heart of the space-craft. When the occasion came for Tau to use the equipment, Kendall Smith had said, he would understand the true nature constituting life.

THE binary descended, and night fell. Glittering shards of the stars pierced the black firmament. Night creatures let out occasional shrieks and snarls. Once a six-legged catlike creature, half as tall as the metal man, was attracted by Tau's movements, and sprang upon him. Tau's responses were mechanical, and he knew no such thing as fear. He simply ripped the creature apart with the tremendous strength that surged in his metal arms.

Later that night he returned to the space-ship. As he approached the gleaming ovoid a circular door opened. Crossing its threshold, he passed into the interior, distorted by intricate mechanisms, and the aperture closed behind him.

Slowly Tau walked to the center of the room, his body reflected in gleaming surfaces of berylite stanchions and sheathings. In the center of the whorled contrivances a row of ingenious troughs lay exposed. Each of these troughs was centered by a molding that had the perfect outline of a man, empty in the crystalline interior.

All that night iridescent gleamings crawled along the monstrous glassite tubes, illuminating the busy robot with an eerie splendor. Miniature lightning shot and sparkled from insulated spheres high in the nose of the craft. Pulsating, sluggish liquids gave off radiant colors and seeped through tortuous channels along the tubes of glassite. The central troughs became opaque, and formed a webwork now into which the throbbing aqueous masses were assembling. A chill current of the outer atmosphere was forced by rotating blades along a channel that whirled in a maelstrom around the central apparatus.

Tau worked swiftly, but days fled by as he watched the quiescent gauges and indicators, lengthened into months. Blinding storms raged unheeded on the exterior of the ovoid craft. Winter came and fled.

At last David and his tribe came to life, all molded from a magnificent scale. During those long months of creation, Tau had imprinted knowledge and learning upon the brains of the dormant bodies. Each awoke with a full knowledge of what had transpired on the dying planet of earth, and each knew that a strange newborn world awaited them. The largest and most magnificent man was named David. The Master had been careful in instructing Tau

about that. Kendall Smith had never had a son. And this synthetic offspring in a distant life-line of the cosmos would be almost like a son for him.

All of Tau's knowledges were conveyed to David and his followers, and he led them into the unknown dangers of the pristine jungled planet, guarding them from the ferocious animals while they learned the edible fruits from the poisonous ones. Gradually David's men came to recognize the dangers and constructed weapons for their own defense.

Another winter descended upon the new world. Food had been stored in the big compartment of the space vessel. Furs of slain animals had been cured to provide clothing and warmth.

Spring thaws came and Tau led them again into the jungle, but now David was big and strong and wary, quite able to defend himself against the dangers of the forest, and Tau's presence was hardly needed, though he always hovered near.

Five men and five women had been given life by Tau's instruments, and it was inevitable that a gradual pairing off would take place. Myri, a model of womanly perfection, had grown to adore the handsome leader of the tribe, and Tau was one of the first to notice signs of fecundity.

A terrific storm lashed the planet. Giant trees groaned and split across the trunks. The raging downpour built up into outer floods that raged down the lowlands in mighty rivers, sweeping everything in its path to destruction. Of all this Tau was oblivious. The fury of the tempest was deadened by the berylite walls of the space ship, and not as loud as the shrill cry of the new-born babe.

Thunder boomed outside. Lightning forked across the rent heavens, sending flickering flashes of illumination through the beating sheets of rain that poured across the glassite sheathing above the neglected control mechanisms. David the second was born, and for a brief time was cuddled against the breast of the metal man, whose terribly strong arms of metal held him as lightly and delicately as could a bed of thistle down. The imperturbable orbs of immobile transparency gazed downward, and suddenly Tau staggered.

DAVID took the child with a startled cry and stood eyeing the tottering robot. Tau's consciousness was centered upon his dragging limbs and for a moment his mentality flickered as though it were gone, then returned. He saw that his metallic body was dark and stained with an odd encrustation, and he turned and made his way to the cubicle in which he had sat while an aeon of time slipped away in the depths of interplanetary space, and the life-line of one aeon had merged with another.

There was one hooded mechanism at which he always sat, and when he was just so, the mind of the Master would speak from down the ages, and the image of Kendall Smith arose, as it had always done, in his mind. He thought he visualized the Master now, out of the dim consciousness of the past. Tall and arresting with the vigorous personality of a dynamic intelligence, the keen grey eyes peered at him again, as they had done in the distant past.

"You, Tau, are just a man of metal," the Master was saying "and yet I've a feeling that part of myself is implanted within you just as part of my mind is implanted into the mechanisms of your consciousness. As a thing of metal, floating in a nonconducting void, you are something that is almost eternal. Yet if you succeed in finding a habitable world, such as the earth has been in the past, the atmosphere of that planet will suffuse about you, and in the triumph of my wishes will lie your downfall. Oxides of the surrounding air will cause your gradual deterioration, and the only one who could help you will be nothing more than motes of cosmic dust in the unpredictable corners of the surrounding universe."

Unseen by David or any of the others, Tau slipped to the door and down a corridorway. Through an aperture he could glimpse the inner room where Myri lay, nursing the infant at her breast. For just an instant he paused, for the Master had never seemed closer than in that single moment.

Turning finally, the metal man walked impassionately through the doorway and vanished into the driving blasts of the lashing storm.

WERWILE OF THE CRYSTAL CRYPT

By GARDNER F. FOX

His black science threatened the whole cosmos. Against him frail Princess Nuala thrust her ancient knowledge—but he sneeringly smashed that. And space-toughened Clark Travis stood by helplessly. Of what use here was a pair of ready fists?

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN better. He admitted that, now. Listening to the spacemen in Trixon and Cleg would have saved his skin. They told him that Flormaseron was a hellhole where Creation had run mad. The only thing was, even they hadn't known how bad it was. Clark Travis worked the walnut stud of his *stil* disintegrator hopefully, but when it sputtered he gave it up.

The arklings were coming for him. Through the opening in the stone traceries of the ancient doorway, he saw the red aura that floated over them as they came up the stone ramp. Clark turned and ran along the sloping floor, down into the black, labyrinthine windings of the ancient city. His spacebooted feet made soft, slapping sounds. His beamlight cast a white brilliant glow ahead of him. He ran past several intersecting corridors before he skidded around a corner into one.

Clark Travis lost himself in the ruins. He went down into the bowels of this city that was in its glory before the Earth had been more than a spinning ball of fire in space. He saw odd animals carved in the walls, queerly human things at work on ships and weapons, tall men and lovely women etched in bas-relief in the marble.

The deeper down he went, the more he was putting himself in the arklings' power. They were familiar with this rotting pile of masonry, where the tunnels were dark strips out of Hades. Their red aura lighted the winding passageways. Clark only had his beamlight for the blackness.

He snapped off the power, stood waiting. His breath came softly. The tunnels were black, as black as space itself; as black as Martin Kent's eyes had been

when he first told him about Flormaseron and the sleeping goddess of the crystal crypt.

"She isn't a goddess, of course," Kent had said, seriously. "She's the last remnant of the first race that ever came into existence. The product of a million generations of culture and scientific knowledge. When the disaster struck at her people, the chief scientists encased her in a block of crystal and hid her somewhere on Flormaseron. She's still there—and still alive.

"Think of it, Clark! A woman with the knowledge of such a race. Before they enclosed her, they thought-fed her brain with knowledge, and so arranged the crystal that during all the years of her interment, she would learn! A brain like that—why it would revolutionize our own culture. The Earth'd go millions of years ahead in science, if we could only find her—and bring her back to life!"

Travis had said, "If she's entombed on a hellhole like Flormaseron, how'd you ever hear of her?"

Martin Kent took Travis by the arm, led him out the door of his office and into the museum corridor. Here in Solar Museum, Mars Division, Kent was absolute ruler. Behind him he had the billions of credits that Earth and Mars and Venus poured into their cultural endeavors. From all over the solar system Solar brought stuffed animals, crumbling bricks from ancient cities, rusted weapons that experts studied and reconstructed in glittering *stil*.

They walked past a panoramic window of a Venusian sea-bottom and into a narrow room that held a safe inset in its east wall. Kent put the flat of his hand on the lock, and waited. A deep humming throbbed



"I—I—underestimated him!"

from behind the glistening metal wall. The huge door swung open.

Kent reached in and brought out a tiny vial of green metal. He unscrewed the lid, withdrew a folded scroll. "It's all here, Clark. Stylogrammed on flexible metal. It's ages old. One of our field parties came across it in a dried sea-bed on Clex. It puzzled us a long time, until Fielding came across a key to the writing, and translated it."

Travis turned the metallic paper over, looked at the queerly graceful writing. He looked at Kent inquiringly.

Kent smiled, "Well, what do you say? I'd go myself if I were younger. And, if it didn't cost so much, I'd send a field party. But it's a gamble, and the Board probably wouldn't agree to spending credits on it. But one man could go. One man—like you."

Travis grinned. He was tall and saturnine, brown with the heat of many suns. His body had been hardened on the deserts of Proxima Centauri, and under the seas of Venus.

Kent went on, "You're the best archaeologist I knew. You've been in tight spots before. You can fight, if you have to. A thing like trouble is an old friend to you."

Travis remembered the polyps in the Venusian water-caves where he'd almost lost an arm before he got past them to bring the museum the only specimen of the primal undine race of Venus ever seen above the sea-mists. He had found a petrified boat on Sirius' third planet, to prove that at one time there had been seas on that baked potato of a planet. But for the last six months he had moped around Mars Port, studying alluvial deposits, wishing for something to take him and his equipment out into the star-paths again.

"I'll go, Mart. And if you'd only shaved this morning I might kiss you for the chance!"

Kent laughed and waved a hand. "Order what you need. I guess the museum can afford a few thousand credits, considering your record—even on such a gamble."

TRAVIS took his spaceboat out from Mars to Titan, and then on to Proxima Centauri. He asked questions in taverns and study halls. He heard of the *arklings*, of the ruined cities and temples.

He heard of the *arklings*' hate for strangers. But Travis didn't scare easily. He checked his weapons and equipment, tossed in an extra case of *safusus*-wine and waved a farewell.

In the darkness he tried to grin and failed. He could hear them coming, at a distance. Their queer *slip-pat* footsounds carried a long way. He couldn't tell just how far away they were.

Travis went on, into the darkness.

The light came suddenly, as he rounded a bend in the tunnel. It was milky-red, like the ancient ko-yao porcelains, delicately flushed and tinted. It shook as a veil might in a breeze. It bellied and leaped. It sent its streamers into the blackness and lighted up the tunnel.

There was a queer menace about the light a beating like the breath of an angry Sindri, Venus-god of fire. It came in little pinkish puffs. There was no heat, only that overbearing menace. Through the pink light, Travis thought he saw queerly shaped forms standing still and brooding. There was a series of cones, and huge globes that seemed to float in an orbit—

He did not hear the *slip-pat* until too late. A hairy body landed on his shoulders and he pitched to his knees on the con-old stone floor. As he fell he whirled and brought his *stil-gun* up. It was empty, but the long, ringed barrel sideswiped the *arkling's* face and knocked him away.

Travis got to his feet as the others hurtled at him. Giant hands that were smooth-palmed and hairy-backed harked at his arms and leather space-harness. He slammed fists at the faces revealed by the floating red aura over them. He tried to use footwork, but the space was too narrow. It was kill or be killed, and he just didn't have the strength to stop them.

A palm caught him on the ear and sent his head ringing like a carrillon tower. A fanged mouth fastened on his thigh, biting deep. Another hand raked at his naked arm and gouged out flesh.

Travis leaped for them, hoping to run over their bodies and go back up the tunnel faster than they could follow. But a big *arkling* rose up from the pack and swung a flat hand. The blow caught him on his chest, sent him reeling and sickened, back and back—

The *arklings* cried out just as the pink

light swept up all around Travis. The menace was unbearable as he fell back and into the pale barrier. It bathed him and whispered to him and threatened him with queer and maddening ways to die. It caught him in its tenuous folds and held him there, cradled, as the voices told him of a water-death that took eleven years, each year more painful than the last; they gloated over a spit and a fire of red coals that cooked a man over a space of months; they whimpered, themselves scarcely daring to think of the barbaric tortures of Rudra the eternal. . .

A cool something touched his forehead. Travis tried to focus his eyes through the subtle distortions of the pink mists. He saw the twin blue pools at first, and then the yellow shower of hair graced with the triangular headgear blazing with jewels. The blue pool were her eyes, and they were wide and open, and filled with a wisdom that made Travis shudder deep in his guts.

And yet, there was a *fear* in those blue eyes, too.

She wore a transparent film with a slender golden thong looped at her middle. She murmured, "You are Clark Travis, an Earth-thing. You came to kidnap me. Yes. And the *arklings* have harmed you."

The woman turned and stared toward the tunnel. A white hand fumbled at her girdle, drew out a pencil-thin rod of metal. She went away from Travis and stepped into the tunnel. Travis tried to watch her, but the pain of his wounds, and the ringing in his temples bothered his eyes. There was a terrific green flare that tinted the pale pink light—

And silence.

Travis knew the *arklings* were just so much powder drifting from tunnel ceiling and wall.

The woman came back, seeming to float through the light. She brooded at him with her wise eyes. Travis could read the fear in them more distinctly, now.

SHE put out a hand and closed her warm fingers on his. She led him through the beams of pink light and into white brilliance, into a room that he had beheld briefly through the pink mists from the tunnel. The cone-towers were there, grouped by threes around the room. And

the globes that rotated lazily overhead in orbits were fiery with golden luminescence. They warmed Travis as they floated.

In the middle of the room lay a huge crystal, scooped hollow by some long-dead artisan. It had indentations and mounds in it. Travis realized it was carved with exact care to fit a reclining body. From the walls of the crystal calyx stemmed thin golden wires, reaching across to the cones. And against the wall, humming and throbbing, were the dynamos and engines that fed the cones.

"I am Nuala," the girl said in her silvery voice. "I am of the Nekkaalad, the first humanoid race in our universe. I have been encased in the calyx for eons. Unrememberable eons. I have seen the rise and fall of your planet, and the fall of others. I have seen—"

She broke off, shuddering.

Travis said wonderingly, "You look so young. If it weren't that Martin Kent told me about you, I'd—"

She let him look at her, standing with her eyes lowered. Travis had seen the *landuli*, the dancing girls raised by the princes of Orion-3; had seen the white-tressed houris of Venus; had seen the golden women bred for men's pleasure by the Kafars of Proxima Centauri. He had never seen anyone as lovely as this first woman. Her legs were long and white, her hips gently rounded. The high arch of her breasts were poetry.

And then she raised her lashes.

Her blue eyes were ancient as space itself, as filled with nameless knowledge, with wisdom beyond Travis's understanding. They had beheld all things, from the slug that came out of a borning world's ocean bottom to the scribbles of the universe's mightiest scientist. Her ears had heard the songs of Sull and the symphonies of Bach and Lyrn.

Travis was aware of all that staring into her eyes. He whispered, "But—how?"

She gestured at the calyx and the wires. "Those machines feed me energy that I need to stay alive. They also feed me the intellectual stimulation I need to stay sane.

"Man's thoughts can be recorded. You know that. Therefore they give off some electrical flow. I will not go into the whys of it. You would not understand. But those

electrical flows never die. They fade and fade, almost to nothingness—but not quite. The dynamos here pick them up, amplify them.

"Here in the crystal calyx I have been fed all thought since the Werwile smashed Flormaseron. I spent years with a being called the Discoverer—before he disappeared into some strange twisting of the space-time continuum. It was he who warned me of Rudra, the Werwile. He said he was stirring—about to come again."

Travis muttered, "The Werwile?"

The girl laughed softly at his puzzled face. "The Werwile, yes. The eternal one. He who never sleeps. He who knows all things. Your race calls him Devil. . . . a race-memory of the first beginnings of the humanoid cell, of the one who smashed the first race just when it was rising to its glory. All your legends, all the legends of all men contain mention of him. The Rebel. Loki. Venus's Badal. Cygni's Daldal."

"You mean, there is someone like that? An actual person?"

"Why not? Your race has dreamed of immortality. So has every race. The Werwile found it."

Travis hooked his thumbs in the metal loops of his space-harness and waited. Nuala walked about the big chamber, touching a glittering cone, staring up at a whirling golden globe.

She went on, "He found it, smashed his own people in a holocaust of destruction, and went into another cosmos. Now he is coming back. The irony of it is that he hollowed out this crystal crypt himself—and it was here he built his own evil knowledge. My people put me here, thinking he would never return. . . ."

Travis chuckled, "What can one man do to worry you?"

She looked at him, and her contempt was as tangible as a slap across the face. "You are a child. Just a baby. You don't dream of the sciences that Rudra will employ. He can sweep your Earth-empire ahead of him as a breeze takes a dry leaf. Look about you. See the cones, the globes, and ask yourself—can your science duplicate them? And then ask, if Rudra, the Werwile, smashed a civilization that could produce all this, what will he do against Earth?"

The fear in the blue eyes touched Travis then, under the leather of his belt. His stomach tightened. Nervously, he licked at his dry lips. He thought of Mars Port, of New York Terminal, of the giant spacers that plied the starways throughout the System, of the jewels and food and riches they carried in their holds. He thought of his Iowa home, of his parents. He visualized that culture, those people, all smashed.

He whispered, "What can we do?"

Nuala shrugged white shoulders. "Nothing. If Rudra smashed the Nekkalah, what can your Earth-people do?"

"We can fight!" Travis grated.

She was amused. "How?"

"We could attack him, before he suspects. He does not know that we know. A little surprise might turn the trick."

The pain of his wounds made him dizzy, but it seemed to Travis that Nuala opened her eyes in surprise. She gloomed at him long moments, a white-fingered hand toying with the golden hemp of her girdle. She murmured softly, "Surprise? Yes, a sudden attack might work. If we could get past the barbarians who guard him, there is something we might do."

Her face grew blurred in his eyes. He saw her as through a mist. He was falling away from her dropping. She cried out in alarm, ran toward him. Her soft hands caught him, but could not hold his big body. He hit the floor and lay still.

THERE was perfume in his nostrils, and a faint murmur of sound. Travis opened his eyes, lay staring up at the white ceiling of the crystal crypt. He turned his neck, saw Nuala with oddly-shaped jars set before her on a long, flat tabletop.

She was murmuring, "If only I were sure of the cell formation, it would be easy. Not like ours, yet different from that of the *arklings*. This . . . yes, this might be the right one."

She came toward him a blue jar grooved and opaque in her hand. Smiling at him, she unscrewed the top and dipped her fingers inside. She brought out a reddish jelly that she smoothed gently into the bite in his thigh, then into the torn flesh of his arm. There was faint pain, a tingle of nausea.

"It will pass," said Nuala. "The red jelly is *celluvalin*. It is—you might call it plastic flesh. It has the cell formation of blood and sinew, and will knit and unite with the torn sections of your body."

Travis lay still. The pain was going swiftly. Tentatively he flexed his leg. It moved easily. He grinned, "You could make a fortune with that on Earth or Mars. What the Fleet wouldn't give for plastic flesh. Whew!"

Nuala sighed and replaced the jars. "If we defeat Rudra, I will return to the calyx. There is no place in the world for me."

Travis saw the blue eyes and the tiredness, the wisdom and knowledge behind them, and bit at his lip. She was right. Earth and Mars, even Cyngi and Lalande-80 would be boring to her. She knew too much to be happy with anyone less intelligent than she. And that meant everyone—except the Werwile.

Travis swung his long legs in their torn spaceslacks off the table. He ran his hands over the broad leathern belt that held his *stil*-gun and holster, over the leather-and-cloth jerkin with the ripped sleeves.

"Guess I'm ready to go. I feel good again. But I'd like to stay that way. Do you have another of those pencil-things?"

He pointed at her girdle. She drew out the weapon and smiled, "You mean the displacer. It forces the electrons of an object out of their orbit. Turns them into other orbits, and makes them dust."

She went to a drawer, drew out three of the pencil-guns, and handed them to him. "You will be safe with these."

Nuala went to the pink barrier and beckoned to him. "Hurry. The sooner we surprise Rudra, the better."

The *arklings* left them strictly alone. They went up through the tunnels, past the carven walls to the ruins of the Nekkalad temples. Sprawled across acres of the barren, pitted surface of the planet, the white towers and jagged walls of the once-massive buildings were like huge playthings scattered by a child-giant in petulant anger.

Nuala breathed, "Before Rudra came and smashed them, they were the loveliest things in all the universe."

The silvered hull of Travis's spacer lay a hundred yards from the crumbled wall,

on a bed of powdered black rock. Nuala walked around it, frowning. She shook her head, her long yellow hair fluttering about her shoulders.

"It will never make the trip. There are things to be done to it."

She looked at him, troubled. She asked, "Do you know what a Calakin curvature-annihilator is? Or a Wilwal warping-beam?"

Travis shook his head.

Nuala said, "I will have to make them, then. You do have a workshop, I know. I read your thoughts as you came toward Nekkalad. Even before that, in Mars Port with Martin Kent."

She went up the metal ladder into the ship. She walked with calm assurance toward the repair room. Travis came after her, wondering, a little rattled. It was odd to see a woman so familiar with his life, with his own inner thoughts. He thought of Jonquilon, the red-headed dancer at Mars Port. Checks red, he settled himself on a bench, and watched her.

NUALA was murmuring, "We'll need a speed-up job on your rockets to get them through the Break. And a super-blastor to add to your own space-warper. Hmm . . . wires all right. Sheet metal not too strong, but it'll do . . ."

Her voice droned on. Travis found himself lost in contemplation of her. She looked like any girl you might see in the Chez Saturn or Planetary Park. She might be fussing over a *jalanadon* steak instead of a space-warper. If it weren't for her eyes . . . so blue . . . but so filled with that frightening knowledge, with wisdom, she'd make a guy a swell wife. He wondered how she kissed.

"Now you must help me," she said, turning to him. She saw his abrupt change of expression and brooded at him. She shook her head suddenly and held out a small engine rigged with wheels and wires, with armatures and generator. "Attach it to the drive shaft, ahead of the combustion chambers."

She showed him how, and explained its working. Travis didn't get the whole thing, but he understood enough to know that even the Chalmers rockets would be improved with this contraption. It smoothed the blastings of the jets, built them up on

their own power. The ship would be like a bullet that, once shot from the gun, would receive another firing every ten feet. It was speed added to speed.

Nuala smiled at his blank look, "Don't bother about whys and wherefors. Just let me handle things."

TRAVIS grumbled under his breath, cramped under the jets and installing the super-blaster. It fretted his male pride to feel that a woman—even such a woman as Nuala—knew more about the workings of his own space-ship than he knew himself.

He hit a Litson wrench against a fitting in anger. "All this talk of Rudra. The eternal werwile! Blah! How do I know there is any such person?"

The thought stopped him. He lay there in the cramped space between jet-sheathing and baffles and grinned at his own stupidity. "How do I know she's the one I came out here to find, even? I never saw her in the calyx!" Deep in the heart of him, he knew that Nuala was—Nuala. Her eyes told him that. He muttered, "Just the same, I don't have any proof about this werwile!"

He crawled out of the rocket-room and stood up in the narrow corridor, wiping sweat from his eyes. Under his feet the floor quivered as the rockets thundered into life. Travis put a calloused hand on a wall-rail. The rockets blasted faster, turning the corridor into a maelstrom of sound.

The ship was lifting, leaving the blackened planet and the ruined temples far below it. There was a sudden weightlessness to his body that told him they were out in space, now, slipping along with vertiginous speed.

He clanked the lock on the rocket-chamber door and went to find Nuala.

She was bent over the control panel, moving her white fingers across the dials. She did not look up when he came to a stop beside her. She merely said, "I'll have to take this all apart. Your wiring system is only 87 per cent efficient."

"That's pretty good," Travis rasped, "On the first trampers that went to the moon, 35 per cent was hot stuff."

Nuala sniffed and reached for a kit of tools. Travis put out a hand and closed it

on her wrist. She looked up at him from under long yellow eyelashes.

"How do I know there is a Rudra?" he said harshly. "How do I know you aren't just using me for . . . for . . ."

"For what?" she asked serenely, not moving to draw her wrist away. "Where in all your worlds would I want to go? I know everything there is to know about them—and you."

"Even—Jonquilon?"

She let amusement reach up through the blue of her eyes. She mocked him gravely, "I know about that weakened you spent with her, when you let the museum get scooped on the canal-men bones on Mars."

Travis let her hand go. He grumbled, "It was worth it."

Her laughter was like silver droplets. She mocked, "What do you know about women? Have you ever seen the water-girls on Tasselas, or the bubble-women that float in the Magellanic cluster? I could show you ways of—"

She broke off and shook herself. She said dryly, "I'm letting my emotions run away with me. I can't do that with the werwile. And, speaking of him—you ask proof, do you?"

Nuala shrugged. "I really can't prove him to you except by showing him. Trust me for three—four days. Then you will have your proof." The fear was back in her eyes as she whispered, "You will have it then. By Grock, you will have it!"

THEY hit the Break a thousand light-years from Van Maanen's star. Travis could see it through the thick, curved window: an oval of darkness somehow shades deeper than the black of space. The pointed prow of the spacer steadied, then sped on. The slit grew larger.

"Pray Grock that Rudra is amusing himself with some new form of life," Nuala whispered, white hand gripping the lever of the speed control. "If he suspects we're entering his little world, he'll scatter our remains across the cluster."

Travis prowled restlessly around the small room. He felt useless beside Nuala. He glanced at the dials and levers she had improved, at the racked disintegrators that the girl, with a hellish cunning, had out-

moded by making them into larger replicas of the pencil-guns. His hard palms slid down his leather jacket, restless, eager to come to grips with something.

The Break was on them, and they were in it. Darkness shrouded the ship, but the rockets thundered through the insulation-sheets. Travis upped the lights with a flip of his hand. Even at full brilliance, he saw Nuala through a pale haze.

"The Break is a barrier that Rudra threw up around his worlds after he smashed Flormaseron. He has three planets all to himself. One is his laboratory, one his armory, one his palace. We'd have no chance at all by attacking the first two. Only on his palace-planet—where he retires to his kinds of pleasure—can we surprise him."

The darkness went away and they were back in space again. Far ahead of them a star glittered with blue shimmerings. Faint and distant from the star, tiny gray balls in space, were three planets.

Nuala touched a stud on the steel wall. "A force-sheath," she smiled. "We'd never get close enough to the planet to land if we didn't have it." A whiteness swept up before the windows, hiding the star and the three planets. Nuala moved forward, past Travis. With a touch of her finger, she slipped on the automatic pilot.

"There. Now we can do nothing else but—wait."

They did not wait long. The humming alarm of the warning buzzer drove Nuala to the controls. With speeding hands, she upped the force sheath stud, depressed the landing lever. Travis was at her side, staring down at rolling grasslands, at the distant peak of a snow-topped mountain. He muttered, "It looks like Earth!"

The spaceship rode on its belly across the grass. Travis went to the curved door and flung it open. Sweet cool air drove inside the room on the wings of a breeze.

Something clanged against the metal doorlock. Hooves drummed on the grass. Another pellet dented the hull of the ship, blew into a thousand splinters. Travis got his face out of the way just in time. His hand dropped to his holster, came up with the ringed *stil*-gun that had been changed over by Nuala. Horsemen were approaching, fast.

8—Planet—Summer

He slammed a finger down on the trigger. Green flame blasted from the muzzle, swept like a cloud across the grasses.

The horsemen came up the side of a hill, heading for the ship. Before the green light reached them, Travis had a quick look at the heavyset, white-skinned men who kneeed their mounts, long tubes at their shoulders. They looked like barbarians, but they held those queer tubes in their hands.

Nuala screamed, "Atholiners! Quick—jump for it!"

She was at his side, clutching at his hands. "Those little pellets—they'll eat everything they hit. Quick! By Grock . . . be quick!"

Travis had a confused glimpse of her flashing eyes, of a gaping hole rapidly spreading along the smooth, metallic side of the ship. His legs tensed, and he was jumping. Ahead of him the green light was bathing the horsemen in its verdant flame. A man screamed. The scream gurgled, died abruptly.

He landed and rolled. He came to his feet, *stil*-gun in hand. The horsemen were just particles of lazily floating dust. Travis turned to his ship, saw it eaten before his eyes, as though an invisible beast were champing on it, taking huge mouthfuls.

Then the ship was gone, and he and Nuala stood alone on the grassy knoll.

"Some surprise party," he said, and laughed harshly. "We have one gun—which doesn't mean a thing, if Rudra is anything like you think he is."

"Rudra? Yes, we must think of him. He may or may not know we are here." She looked about at the windswept knoll, at the gnarled pine trees standing straight and tall, bleak and stern. She glanced away, toward a tier of flattish rocks. "Sometimes his horsemen take care of—intruders. Sometimes he lets visitors—wander. Never has he let them escape him for very long."

Something of the menace of the man beat at Travis, as though a col wind moaned above the pines and blew past his ear with mocking words. *Rudra will get you if you don't watch out. Rudra has never let a visitor escape him for very long.*

He put his hands on his *stil*-gun and stroked its rounded grip. "We can't just

stay here. We'd starve to death in these wilds." His hand indicated the windbent oaks below, the gaunt pines, the rolling grasslands that lifted toward distant hills.

Nuala brooded at him. Her red mouth quirked, almost angrily. She snapped, "I've been thinking! We still can surprise him if we could get into Kovokod, the main city."

"Why not go disguised as some of his people?" Travis wondered. He grinned, "You could be my wife—"

Nuala sniffed her contempt. She lashed at him, "I am above emotions. I am almost pure thought. Don't distract me from my planning."

Travis chuckled, "A couple of barbarians. We'd look pretty good as nomads, wouldn't we? Well, what do you say? What's to stop us?"

Nuala snapped, "Our features! They are too delicate, too finely formed. Rudra hastened the evolution of his people speeded up their ascent in time. They are still brutish, thick of nose, of lip."

"If we had some of the *celluvalin*. I could do a pretty fancy job on our faces. I've moulded life forms in clay often enough for Solar Museum."

Nuala eyed him wonderingly. "You are a young race, but you Earth-things do come up with some good ideas. There will be medical centers on Rudraline. If we can find one, there will be *celluvalin* there."

They set out under the pines, walking for the windbent oaks, side by side.

FOR three days they moved southward. Here and there were farms, sprawled across the land. Travis walked with his eyes on them, studying the architecture, the terrain. Already, he told himself, he could do a few panoramic windows for Solar—if he ever got out of this thing alive.

Once Nuala caught him by the wrist, dragged him back to the shelter of a dwarf bush. She whispered, "A caravan. The Rudradians are taking their produce to market at Kovokod!"

Travis watched, fascinated. The horsemen in plain leather harness rode with the ease of Cossacks in the saddle, far ahead of the slower-footed pack-animals, giant sloth-like creatures in rich trappings. They

bore ornate palanquins on their backs, or pulled huge wagons by gilded reins. In the middle of the caravan rode the nobles, draped in cloth-of-gold, glittering with jewels.

Nuala shook his shoulder. She hissed. "We can't waste time. Quickly, now. They are almost past—"

They scrambled unseen onto a wagon...

They found a medical station in the dawn of the fourth day. There was a nurse inside, asleep at the table. Nuala crossed the room with long strides, bent over her from the rear, did something to her at the base of the skull with her fingertips. The nurse pitched forward, sprawled along the edge of the table.

Travis scooped handfuls of *celluvalin* from an earthen jar and went to work on his face before a mirror. With steady fingers he altered his nose, broadened and widened it, gave it a snoutish look. He modeled his mouth to brutish slackness. He lowered his forehead. When he was through he was a step above the ape.

Nuala was watching him with wide eyes. She whispered, "I do not like you—like that."

He stood over her, toweling his hands. He said, "I feel different, too. Almost like a—beast."

She was near him, blue eyes uplifted, red mouth quivering. He put his hands on her arms, lifted her against him. He bent and kissed her. For a single instant she yielded to him and her mouth was a honeyed fire. Then she thrust him away, stood panting. Her anger crackled in her eyes, in the rise of her pointed breasts.

"You are a beast! You—"

Travis chuckled, "I just had to do it, honey. I wanted to see what it was like."

He scooped *celluvalin* in a hand and slapped it down on her cheek. He worked swiftly, moulding and shaping the cell-jelly before it hardened and adhered to her skin. By the time he was finished, her rage was spent. He stepped back, eyed her calculatingly. He nodded. "You look just like the nurse, now. Not a bad job, if I do ring my own alarm-bell."

Nuala lifted the mirror and looked into it for a long moment. Once she lifted her eyes and stared enigmatically at Travis. Then she casually lifted a hand and undid the fastenings of her translucent gown.

Calmly she stepped down from it, ignoring Travis's sudden, "Hey!"

She lifted the white uniform from the prostrate nurse. Deftly she hooked it about her and stood back. "Now the resemblance is complete. I will be a nurse. You—my amorous Earth-thing—will be my patient. A mental deficient. You look the part perfectly."

Travis went, "Ouch!" and followed her out into the sunlight.

Toward noon they were overtaken on the broad highway by an advance guard of horsemen for another caravan. One of the horsemen shouted at them. Nuala screamed back. Not understanding their language—Nuala had always spoken spaceenglish to him—he said, "What'd they want to know?"

"If my *babuvol* was too poor to buy me a horse," she snapped.

"*Babuvol*?"

"Husband to you. Mate. I told them you weren't my husband." She added sweetly, "I said you were crazy, that you suffered from the delusion of having glass toes, among other things."

Travis scowled at her as she swung along blithely. He thought of a remark, but ignored it.

The caravan crept up to them, engulfed them. Travis stared rudely at the sleek horses, at the handsomely wrought designs on saddle and stirrup. He eyed the monstrous pack-sloths carefully, making sure that he was nowhere near the flat, gigantic paws when they tromped down on the road. He caught sudden glimpses of foodstuffs, of silver jars, of priceless tapestries.

Once a nobleman reined in his mount and spoke to them. Nuala did not raise her eyes but she murmured, "He is a feeble one, lordship. There is a sickness in his mind. If you could hear him speak—"

She nudged Travis with an elbow, hissed into his ear, "Say something for the man, idiot!"

Travis babbled, "Intry-mintry, look so sly—spaceman, spaceman, in your eye!" from the words of a song currently popular on Mars.

The nobleman made a pitying sound with his lips, ignoring Travis's glare. He tossed a ring to Nuala. "The protection of the Lord Railan, nurse."

Nuala hid the ring in a pocket. Eyes straight ahead, she said to Travis, "It was a happy thought, your passing as a lunatic. It is a part that comes easily to you."

The ring was a talisman that hired mounts, servants. The engraved seal on the circlet opened men's eyes, and when Nuala whispered suavely, "The Lord Railan will pay double . . ." the charm was complete. Soon they left the caravan and went on ahead.

THE twin towers of Kovokod were banded white and black. They dozed in the sunlight above the walled city. Outside the walls were sloped launching cradles for stratosphere fliers and spacers. Like toys, pilots and passengers moved from stationhouse to ladders, crossed back and forth. Occasionally a police flier spiralled slowly over the ramped buildings and arched levels of the city. Travis could see tri-wheeled vehicles speeding back and forth on the raised streets.

Nuala gestured and Travis saw a huge gate swarming with men and women on foot, on horse, or seated luxuriously in the tri-wheelers. "We'll mingle with the crowd. That way, and with the ring, we can get in easily enough."

Travis gawked at the throngs. Nuala spoke occasionally, and Travis knew she was calling attention to his mental state. She was mocking him, but Travis added to her words by singing ribald ditties that were famous from Earth to Centauri. He even made up one about Nuala. Only her sudden hiss and pinch brought remembrance that she could speak any tongue.

The guard at the gate eyed the ring and Nuala. He licked his lips at her words and let them through. They faded into the crowds, Nuala walking swiftly, not giving Travis a chance to stare at the straight, many-windowed buildings, the ornate balconies, the several roads that were like lattices linking the city together.

"We must get into one of those towers!" Nuala hissed. "They are Rudra's laboratories. There he houses his discoveries, the rarest weapons, the finest engines."

"Maybe the ring—?"

"Not for the towers. I know this world, from the crypt. I have spent too many years spying on Rudra."

Travis rubbed his knuckles thoughtfully. He murmured, "I wanted something to come to grips with. Maybe I can get you into the tower."

The tower entrance was like a halved egg, bulging out from the straight wall of the black-and-white structure. There was no visible means of entry. It seemed a sheer rounded oval of stone. Travis stared at it uncertainly, walking past.

"Are you sure?" he asked Nuala. "That doesn't look like a door to me!"

"What do you know of doors?" she snapped. "It opens to vibratory impulses. Walk close enough and it will open—and a blast of power will turn you into smoke."

Travis fingered his jaw. "If I walk toward it and just as the thing opens I dart aside . . . it might miss me."

"A crude approach," observed Nuala, but her eyes were thoughtful.

Stung, Travis snarled, "Sometimes you accomplish more by crudeness. If the other guy isn't expecting it."

He would not have done it, if he hadn't felt so helpless and useless beside Nuala. He knew it was foolhardy, even as he ran, right hand going for the *stil*-gun. In a soberer moment he would have waited, have let her figure out the answer, as she had figured out the other answers.

His dark hair whipped in the wind that came up the street when he slid to a halt. The egg-shaped adit was lifting, disclosing black depths behind it, glittering metal, a running figure.

Nuala screamed, but Travis moved before he heard her. The *stil*-gun belched green mist into the darkness. Travis was sliding, scrambling aside.

Light—dazzling, blinding light—shot out of the glittering metal engine just before the green mist touched it. The light was hot. Crouched against the wall, face turned away from its brilliance, Travis felt the heat of it. His brow beaded with sweat. The black hairs on his forearms stank where they crisped.

Nuala went by him, crying, "Now! Now!"

Staggering, he followed her. She went into the blackness, was a pool of whiteness for an instant. He came low and fast on her heels. The closing doors scraped his leg, it was that close.

The engine that spit the light beam was

gone. There was just a gaping hole in the metal floor, a bent armature pulled loose from its housing, a glob of red flesh . . .

Nuala was on the staircase, going up. Travis saw a Kovokodan face leer at her, saw a tube lifted. He showered the face with green mist, watched it explode, blow into powder. Then he was beside her, thrusting her back.

"I'll take the lead," he growled.

He used the *stil*-gun twice more before they reached the big chamber at the top of the tower. Facing death, taking risks, using the muscles of his space-hardened body, Travis felt the elixir of battle pound in his veins. He was a person again, not just a thing dragged along by the last woman of the Nekkalad.

Nuala went by him as he stood in the doorway. She raced to banks of buttons spread across the western wall of the room. Her fingers slammed down, played like the digits of a Venusian pianist across the complicated keyboard.

She was just in time. The floor shuddered under their feet as the tower rocked. But the floor held. And the tower stood. Nuala threw back her head, flung wild and eerie laughter at the flat ceiling.

"By Grock, I've won! I've won!"

She put trembling fingers to her face, clawed at it, tearing strips of flesh away. Travis opened his mouth, closed it. Bit by bit, she pulled the *celluvalin* loose and cast it from her. She swung about, faced Travis. Once more her face was lovely, mouth warm and kissable.

"You helped me, Earth-thing. You helped me get here! I'll reward you for that!" She lifted her arms, did a girlish pirouette.

Travis growled, "What about Rudra?"

She laughed. It was like tuned glass tinkling. "Rudra himself discovered the warp-sheath. I've pulled this tower into another dimension. He can't harm us because he can't find us! Oh, Travis, my dear . . ."

Her hands touched his nose and mouth. Gently she removed the *celluvalin*, cleansed his cheeks until he stood tan and grim-lipped, the Clark Travis she first had seen in the pink barrier outside the calyx chamber.

"Now, Clark Travis (he is) you may kiss me!"

He stretched out his arms, caught her warm and soft against him, bent his mouth—

"Charming," sneered a cold voice. "Of the *kovokodans*, this I would have expected, but you two are from a higher race—"

HE STOOD in the center of the room, tall and lean; his height and spareness emphasized by the black cloak he pulled about him as though against the cold. His thin lips sneered. The narrow brows above black eyes were upraised to form two living insults.

Nuala whimpered. She thrust a hand to her mouth. "Rudra!"

The dark man moved forward. Now Travis could see a circlet of tiny stars, revolving and shimmering, coruscating light, that swung like a fallen halo about his head. As the man went, so went the ever-turning stars.

"You know me? But you must, to be so familiar with my sciences. I do not know . . . you. Or do I?"

The black eyes touched Travis, slid away. Travis growled low in his throat at the blank dismissal of those eyes. He was less than a slug, not given as much courtesy as a canal-minnow. Nuala was shrinking back against his chest as the eyes drove into her.

Rudra whispered, "But—you! You are familiar. Something from out of the past . . . the dead past . . . centuries . . . eons . . . ages ago. A woman—a queen—Nuatha of the Yellow Hair. Queen of the Nekkalah!"

"I am Nuala. Her daughter."

Rudra looked interested. Nuala went on, "Before you smashed Flormaseron, my parents and the Nekkalah scientists imprisoned me in your own crystal crypt. They fed me energy . . . and the thought-waves of all living things. I know of you, Rudra, of your plans . . ."

The dark man laughed. "By my beginning! I am knowing the first interest I've had in a thousand million centuries. You've set yourself up against—me? Against the eternal one? The Werwile?"

Nuala moved her white fingers in a queer pattern. They seemed to blur before Travis's eyes, become faint and shadowy. Her hand disappeared. Rudra moved sud-

denly, swore by a long-forgotten god. He said abruptly, "You'd pull my heart into a different space-time, would you? Leave me locked forever in some blackness?"

His own hands moved, but Nuala was quicker. Her body swayed, twisted in odd manner. She disappeared. Rudra cried out. He brought his hand back to view again. There were teethmarks and blood on it. Nuala formed, laughed softly beside Travis; blood on her ruby mouth.

"Am I a fit opponent, Rudra—not-long-to-be-eternal?"

Rudra nursed his bitten hand in the black cloak. His black eyes glittered dangerously above the beaked nose, the ruddy mouth. Travis thought he looked like a cornered Saturnian vampire at that moment.

Rudra laughed. It was, surprisingly, a pleasant laugh. He bowed, and there was no mockery in it.

"You are a worthy opponent, Nuala. None that I know of could have done that to me—but you. You say you know my plans? Good! You know my thoughts, my sciences? Good again. Two equal opponents—you with that creature beside you to aid you, me with my *kovokodans*. Let us see who will turn the tide. . . .

"I had the Lord Railan and others ease your way to me. I was—curious. Now I am glad. I will enjoy our duel, Nuala. Good—hunting!"

He was gone.

The silence was cold, as though his passing had taken a fire from the room. Nuala shivered, looked dubiously at Travis. He said tactlessly, "I thought you said you'd won."

"I—underestimated him. I'd forgotten that Rudra smashed Flormaseron, that he has all the science that ever was at his fingertips. I thought that by taking his tower into another dimension I could strike at him before he knew where we were. Strike and annihilate! Now . . . I do not know."

There was doubt in the blue eyes, and the old fear. Only the fear was stronger, now. It was a curiously tangible thing, beating out and around the room, running chilled tentacles down Travis's back.

He shook himself, said savagely, "So we can't surprise him. Then let's slug it out, toe to toe. It's him or—us!"

"But he has so many sciences . . ." she wailed.

"Sciences you know just as well!" Travis snapped. "And before we're over it'll be the first law of nature all over again. The survival of—the fittest!"

"If I only knew what he meant to do—"

Travis choked. He put out a hand, vied it on her arm. "The crypt! By the eternal! If you could move this tower into another dimension—move it to Flormaseron! Enter the calyx! Tap his mind! Checkmate him!"

Hope dawned in the blue eyes. Hope stilled the shudder rippling down her back. She cried, "Yes, yes. That's our chance, our one big weapon—the calyx!"

Nuala moved her hands in that queer, flowing motion. Her eyes were wide and staring. She whispered, "It is easier to move the warping controls—this way. The distances in the dimensional flows are shorter."

There was a faint dizziness as the tower reeled. Travis had an odd instant of vision, where he saw whirling clouds of elfin dust, heard the discordant music of distorted space. In mind's eye, he glimpsed the tower as it swung through a blackness striped with red traceries. There was a jar, a sudden shock—

A WALL of the tower shone with iridescent nacre. Through the pale pearl glitter, Travis saw the chamber of the calyx, the cones and globes circling endlessly and shedding their soft light, the great sculpted-out hollow of the crystal.

"Step quickly," whispered Nuala. "Step through . . ."

She was a blur of movement, leaping for the nacre. Travis clutched for her hand and found it warm and soft as he hit the shimmer with her. A moment of cold, then they were inside the crystal crypt. Nuala went to the crystal, lay down within it, attached wires to grips, rested her golden head against the oddly wrought headpiece that was wired to the dynamos.

Travis watched her hands lift and blur as a faint, nauseous color came seeping up through the very stones of the floor. Travis knew that some light-colors could affect people physically, but this was sickening, overpowering. Much of that color, and he would go mad. His brain reeled. His stomach writhed—

The light went away, but Nuala's hands were still invisible, as she worked the forces hidden within the captured tower. Travis knew she was hitting back at Rudra, reading his mind, searching for and finding the counter-agent, the necessary checkmate. Her eyes opened a second, looked into his. She whispered, "Watch the screen, Travis. The screen . . ."

He could see now what she was doing. The west wall of the tower that appeared through the nacre light was a giant visiscreen. In it the tower of Rudra in his city of Kovokod stood like a blackened giant above the ruins of the leveled city. Stone buildings were tossed and flattened. Smoke eddied upward in huge billows from charred and stark stumps of buildings. A woman fled with clothes ablaze along the upended stones of what had been a broad street. From the black and sullen sky red and fiery balls rolled and thundered, broke and splashed, devouring, on the city. The balls toppled walls, exploding; ate up wooden buildings with flaming tongues, caught and engulfed human beings, burning.

Sickened, Travis turned away—

It caught him, then. Bent and flung him back. Staring, he saw Nuala half out of the crystal block, rigid and writhing, twisted and distorted by some queer force. Her red mouth drew back in agony, screams gurgling in her throat.

And bent and twisted in her likeness, straining until their molecules whined, were the dynamos and cones and globes.

"Magnetic . . . flux . . . by Grock! Grock!" she screamed. "I can't hang on. It's got me. Grock . . . good Grock . . ."

Travis dove to yank her free—and ran into it. He felt it in his fingers, first. It was a maddening wrench that bent them as if they had been boneless. He leaped sideways and the thing caught him in the middle. On hands and knees he crawled away, crawled toward the only spot that offered safety.

He slid into the nacre coldness, dropped onto the stone floor of the captured tower. Sobbing, he lay there, listening to Nuala scream.

This is the end of it. There is no way out—

No way out. Only death from torture. Or—maybe not death. Just torture for

Nuala. He remembered the pink and menacing girdle that secured the crypt from the *arklings*. The unseen voices, recorded somehow by the first humanoid race, had told of tortures—*Nuala, stop screaming! God, I can't stand it!*

Nuala, screaming. And Rudra—gloating!

Rudra!

Travis lifted his tanned face. His eyes burned savagely, staring across the tower toward the dials and levers that controlled those forces that only Rudra and Nuala understood. Travis moved his hands, getting to his feet. He looked at his hands, balled them into hard fists. He whispered, "I wanted something to come to grips with, I needed something to put my hands on, to hit, to batter!"

Travis snarled, "Rudra!" and slammed his hands on the levers. He had watched Nuala move them. He knew how to move the tower through the dimensional paths Nuala had guided it.

Under his feet the tower swayed, reeled sickeningly.

And then—

The two towers met with a jarring crash. Travis was already in midair, leaping through the gap. Stones met and tumbled. The roof of Rudra's blackened tower was caving in. Travis swept through the air, aimed for a crumbled section of roofing. His hands went out to fasten on smashed tile. Through the rent, he saw Rudra at his visiscreen, laughing at the twisted, helpless thing that was Nuala in the calyx—

TRAVIS went mad. He leaped for Rudra, leaped from the roof. His fist caught him beside the cheek, drove his head back. His knees hit the man's chest as he fell, toppled him backward. Sobbing, Travis went for him even before he hit the floor.

They rolled across the tiling, bounced off the metal leg of a table, rammed into the base of the great visiscreen. Travis fought with the strength of a hundred men, thinking of the crumpled loveliness of Nuala. His fists were as ten. His endurance seemed drawn from a bottomless well of energy. He fought and hammered and sobbed, a red haze of fury floating before his eyes.

And Rudra weathered the storm. The stars that circled about his head glowed brighter and brighter. Strength grew and grew in Rudra's body. He broke free of Travis, thrust him back with a vicious kick: laughed at him. He moved his hands in the fluid motion and there was blind, stabbing pain in Travis's guts, an agony that lanced red-hot needles from the roots of his hair to his toenails.

Travis rolled on the floor, clutching his broken body. He saw legs, hit them. Rudra fell over him.

Travis summoned all his strength, tore loose from the pain inside him, fell on Rudra. The revolving stars cut his lip, blinded him with their brilliance.

It was a voice whispering inside him, like Nuala's voice. "*The star-girdle is his weakness. Break the stars and you break Rudra. Without the stars, Rudra is—nothing!*"

Travis lifted his hands and closed them on the stars. Rudra whispered. For the first time, Travis detected fear in the man's eyes. He tried to wrench free, brought his hands back from inside Travis, scrabbled for his wrists.

Silently they struggled there. The pain was gone and Travis knew that this was it. He had to win now, or not at all. Now . . . now . . .

The stars came free. They whispered sibilantly, loosening in their orbit, shooting wildly across the room. They stung and bit into Travis's hands. They whirled, exploding into puffs of silvery dust. The dust showered down on Rudra, on Travis. It stung the nostrils, the eyeballs . . .

"Rudra!" whispered Travis.

There was no Rudra, only a widening glob of black wetness, melting away as wax melts from a candle in fierce heat. Travis rolled free, slapped at the blackish stains on spaceslacks and jacket.

The blob of jelly loosened rapidly, went to liquid as a breeze swept over the ruined city and into the blasted tower. The liquid ran freely, went down the cracks, dripped wetly on the rafters and the stones far below.

Ancient! Ancient! So old the tongues of men had no word for it. From the beginning he was, and was no more

Travis turned away from the stench. He stumbled across the room toward the con-

trol levers on the wall. With trembling hands he shut them off.

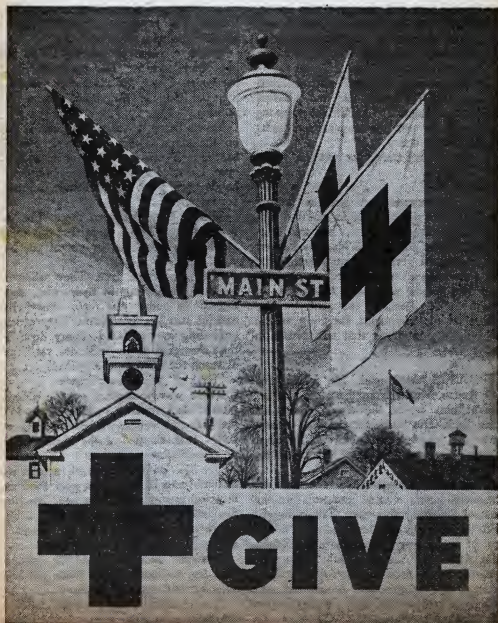
IT WAS EASY, going back. Through the nacre curtain, as the tower settled down, Travis saw Nuala standing beside the shattered calyx. Both hands were plunged in her thick golden hair. Her blue eyes were blank and staring.

Her memory is gone, Travis thought,

running toward her. The pain and the magnetic flux did it. She isn't Nuala of the crystal crypt any longer. She is only a girl.

His dream of Nuala cooking a *jalanadon* steak in his little apartment at Mars Port would come true. This Nuala he could marry.

Travis caught her in his arms. Her lips were sweet as he bent and kissed her.



(Continued from page 2)

our organs *et al*) is caused by the surface of our planet preventing us from making this lovely descent. I suspect he is referring to the rotational velocity of the earth by that figure. If he is trying to say that the force acquired from this rotational velocity exactly counterbalances the force from gravity, he is wrong. If this condition prevailed at, say, the offices of PLANET, everyone would be suspended in air because they would be weightless. (*Please, don't anybody tell him!—Ed.*) If one walked toward the equator, he would find that since the rotational velocity was increased, things would go shooting off into space. The land of magnolias and corn pone would have long since passed off towards Alpha Centuri in a tangential line. I forget the exact figure, but I think the 'present Earth day would have to be about an hour long for this unhappy state to occur. I could calculate the exact figure but this is vacation. Class dismissed.

The main reason for this missive is to make a reply to one six-year-old intellect who signs his mail Edwin Sigler. I have hesitated to bring up the subject of this character's mental deficiencies in public since I might be accused of taking revenge merely because he panned a fanzine of mine. Ah well, some of fandom's greatest minds and now Sigler have done that. What has irked me are some of the statements he has made. Judging from his letters, he has had no outstanding scientific training that would justify him in doubting certain parts of the Einstein theories. Such as wasting—oh, eight years of scientific training in some college, say. His higher math seems, in fact, to be limited to a rather shoddy brand of arithmetic. I was rather amused to find that in the Winter issue, he made a calculation involving approximate measurements to come out with a figure accurate to twenty significant figures! The term "probable error" would probably be lost on him. In a single sentence, he once disputed: the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction theory, the possibility of radiation-produced mutations, the Doppler Effect (the shift to the red in the spectrum as caused by the expansion of the universe), the possibility of ray guns and possibly a few other things I have since forgotten. No doubt it may fairly be argued that Einstein, Gamow, and all the others have no more right to their opinions than Sigler. Actually, the aforementioned scientists have spent their lifetimes doing a wee bit more than trying bank shots down at Joe's Refined Billiard Emporium. Were they to make the same number of dogmatic assertions without carrying on experimental work, we would still be back in the days of Aristotle.

At this point, I would like to thank dear Mr. Payne (gad what a name to pun on!) for having printed various controversial letters such as Mr. Sigler's. More fun. . . .

Sincerely,

BOFF PERRY

ARRIBA, CUCARACHA!

Box 1884,
Denver, Colorado

DEAR EDITOR,

Edwin Sigler's letter in the current issue overlooks some very obvious facts about the race question. Perhaps the most obvious is that what he calls the "Anglo-Saxon" drive has been driv-



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ing for only cosmic minutes. Only a little more than a century ago, Anglo-Saxons were paying tribute to the Bey of Algiers who was black.

Anything faintly resembling Anglo-Saxon dominance stops short some four hundred years ago. But the record of civilization goes back as far as recorded time, and judging from mighty ruins (some of them in darkest Africa) the time can be rolled still further back into incalculable antiquity. None of these cultures were Anglo-Saxon, most of them weren't even white. Egypt and Ethiopia, to say nothing of Asiatic countries, reached a cultural level not equaled in northern Europe until millenia later, while our Anglo-Saxon ancestors were batting each other over the head with clubs.

True, these civilizations decayed, died out. Does Mr. Sigler imagine there won't be a day when archaeologists are exploring the Empire State Building, or excavating the state capitol in Topeka? Or pondering what strange gods were worshipped in 1947 A.D. as they look at the shrine of democracy on Mt. Rushmore?

Then again it's a highly debatable question whether, in terms of human happiness, we have advanced appreciably beyond the Indians. True, we've brought the Indian movies and (occasionally) indoor plumbing. We've also brought him tuberculosis, venereal disease and poverty. And are we ourselves *really* happier than the Indians were?

Too much of that Anglo-Saxon drive has been devoted to ingenious ways of killing people efficiently, of imposing the will of the "master-race" on peoples less well-equipped for mass murder. Is it really a sign of progress that today an American can kill a thousand people with an atom bomb where an Indian (or an ancient Egyptian) could kill only one with an arrow?

It's worth noting that *every* account of the Indians' first meeting with the white man showed the Indians to be kindly, patient and hospitable, doing everything within their means to befriend the strangers. The Indian wars didn't commence until after extensive acquaintance with the white invaders. Do you think any Anglo-Saxon "Christians" would show a similar kindness to an armed invader?

Lastly, there is the distinct possibility that the Anglo-Saxon drive will, in the near future, drive the Anglo-Saxons right off the planet, along with all other humans, via an atom-bomb war, leaving as monarch of all it surveys, some such creature as the cock-roach, which might conceivably survive the radiations. Well, at least, that would settle once and for all the question of racial superiority.

Yours very truly,

R. C. SANDISON

MALE MONKEYS DOOMED

6310 Madison Rd.,
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR,

My, has it been three months since I winged that last missive your way? Goodness, hardly enough time to get over the shock. But leave us not quibble, there is work to be done!

Anderson has indeed improved over the last issue's bit of paint slinging. Only, the hero looks a little too much like the bems. But the dame was well drawn, which is supposed to be the most important thing on a P.S. cover.

Bradbury, of cawse, takes first place in the fiction department. I read every Bradbury story through at least twice in one sitting. This yarn, while not as good as previous ones, was well worth the double-feature treatment. Characterization and emotional quality again were the main properties of the story, and they were woven in as only Ray can weave them.

Planet in Reverse was a well written, clever little item which snatched second place. Now I'd like to read the same story from the girl's point of view. Starting at the end and working forward. *Idik yeh nuf emos*

Mind Worms takes third. Fine bit of writing. Hmmm, already down to three, and neither one of the novels rated yet. Tsk. Aha, Walton breaks the jinx with his *Design For Doomsday*. As a rule Walton is one guy who turns my stomach, but this story appealed to me, for some reason. McDowell is down in fifth spot, though he is usually higher. Nothing wrong with this story, just that the others were too good. I like the system of "government" that he has set up in his two-part series. Hope he writes more yarns with this same background, developing it a little more. The rest of the stories I will not comment on, mainly because I haven't read them.

Artwork improved, Martin best on page 109. McWilliams second on 69. And again on p. 43.

With the preliminaries out of the way, we can turn to the Vizi, where the real meat in PS is found. Glad to see it longer this time. But that makes it harder to pick three winners. Even Carter was good this time, though he was obviously copying Chad Oliver. Tsk on thee, Lin. I got wealthy-widow's-behind sitting in the library as Sigler suggested. Found out some very interesting things. Do you know that the number of male chimpanzees is one third of what it was in 1919? (*And females . . . ?—Ed.*) But I stray from my point. I ask you one question, Siggy. Hast thou ever heard of environment? I say no more. Martin Axelgrease (or sumthin') was quite amusing, though I expect a thundering tirade from Westbrook Sigler next ish. Van Covering has been much funnier. Fie on thee, Johnny, get back in the groove. Dan Mulcahy has expressed my opinion perfectly on the "Die I thot I'd Laugh" thing. I tear my hair in anguish whenever I hear it. Gaggggghhhhhhhh. Anger was hokey dokey, but his missive was overshadowed by the greatness of Clements. Love that boy. Chad Oliver is always welcome, even in his currently subdued form. Give him first place. Some fellows worship Lovecraft . . . I worship Oliver. Even when he doesn't write in, he should get first pick for what he would have said if he did. Get what I mean? You don't? Oh well . . . give Carter second. At least he uses good taste in people he impersonates. Third to Covering, just for siendship frake.

And a parting thought: Thanks for the plug of my two zines. No need to strain your eyes, there ain't any in this one. (*Stinker!—Ed.*)

Cynicerly,

JACK CLEMENTS

WIGODSKY SLAYS US

PESTIFEROUS LILY POND,

306 Evans Avenue,
San Antonio, Texas

Well, in the spring 48 ish of planet is a sequel to BTYF. In BTYF, p. 20, "Capital punishment

had been abolished along with a score of other institutions such as marriage, divorce, and the family." In the sequel, p. 42, Jon and Ieth are going to take a honeymoon. It doesn't make sense. Also, if the Varkans had such slow metabolism, they would have moved too slowly for humans to contact them, as it would take them approximately a year to take a deep breath, for the Varkans to do it, I mean. Aside from these errors in logic, *Outcasts of Solar III* is a fairly good story, which is unusual for a PLANET novel.

Then *Design for Doomsday* would have been a masterpiece, if it had not been for the crude handling of the love story.

Space Trap at Banya Tor would have made a better impression if it had not been a sequel to an unequal masterpiece like *The Derelict*.

Mind Worms is ingenious, but ingenuity isn't enough.

Jonah of the Jove-Run is good, but not enough emotion to bring it up to Bradbury's standard.

Planet in Reverse is terrible; that is, an average planet story.

Confusion Cargo is completely silly, but that is above Putnam's standard.

The cover smells as if the artist had thrown limburger cheese at it.

Pp. 6-7: Horrible. P. 13: Wasn't Emil human in the story? He looks like a double Martian. P. 39: Are those goats Varkans? P. 43: Ah, a masterpiece at last. P. 51: Is this symbolism or astigmatism? P. 59: Ugh! P. 69: Ditto! P. 81: The same! P. 84: Even-worse! P. 94: Am I crazy or are you?

Originals go to Oliver, Carter, and Kirschnick. Why didn't you print my banshee letter? It was silly, but not as bad as Axelrod's thing. I intended to write a completely serious letter, but, just to conform, this came out.

I hopped into my time machine and went back to the year 15, 583, 769, 432 B. C. There I met a hairy savage. Quoth I, "Me Wigodsky!" Quoth he, "Me Payne!" He had gone back in time, too. We took our axes and killed each other. And this is my ghost writing to his ghost.

See you in another thirteen weeks,

MICHAEL WIGODSKY

BOWS AND ARROWS

R. R. 2,
Germantown, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR,

I've been reading science fiction for some years and am finally overcome by the urge to emulate the members of that odd clan that make up your letters column. So herewith a few comments on your spring issue.

Design for Doomsday—Best story in the mag but why did the cover artist have to make the delicate, fragile, etc. undersea people into the customary malignant BEM's?

Planet in Reverse—A neat venture into the unsolvable paradoxes of time theory. This one gets even balmer if you try to extend the reversed time field to the physical existence of Neptune.

Jonah of the Jove-Run—I always did like these super minds. Some might even exist; for instance, there were some recent news stories of a human dowsing (*Divining*—Ed.) rod in South Africa, although I'll bet that one's a phony. I don't quite see though how the ship managed to



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stop and land in the asteroid belt without its detectors.

The Outcasts of Solar III—Good melodrama but would a guy fated to live 10,000 years by a slow metabolism have a fast pulse? I think not. And what did the second NPA discover? The idea was kicked around for a dozen pages before being lost in the void.

Mind Worms—Fair story but punk psychology; we humans are just too darn egotistical to develop such a mass inferiority complex. We'd never have lasted this long if we could.

Confusion Cargo—Run of the mill and it violates good short story technique by introducing two themes of which the minor one culminates in the rather obvious surprise ending which should keynote the whole story. Also, if viscodium can assume the properties of a fluid when in contact with one, what kept it from assuming the properties of that well-known fluid, air, with which it was also in contact (*Is air a fluid?*—Ed.)

Space Trap at Banya Tor—This is a rather glaring example of what ought to be kept out of science fiction. Rewrite the thing substituting bows and arrows and sailing ships for blasters and space ships and the story remains unaffected. After all, if there is any point in writing science fiction, the science factor should form part of the essential motivation of the story. I've no objection to melodrama, but it rather than the science should supply the window dressing for the story. I can understand Matthew's aversion to dead cats—he deserves 'em.

BOB ACKER

KNOTS, SPELLED BACKWARD

1431 Second Avenue S. E.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

DEAR EDITOR,

Three cheers for McDowell. *The Outcasts of Solar III* was the best thing since *Beyond the Yellow Fog*. In which, if I remember correctly, Gavin Murdock made his first appearance. Those corporation names are swell, but tell friend Emmett to think up some new ones. After reading BTYF thirty-two times I'm getting a little tired of hearing about "Tri-World". I like McDowell's undercover agent stories and TOOST III is a perfect example. That little episode concerning Ieth's skirt wasn't necessary, but it would certainly take more than that to ruin, even blemish, anything McDowell ever put out. There is only one thing that bothers me. Gavin Murdock has changed from a rather handsome chap to a bony-fingered, cold-blooded monster, who reminds me directly of Humphrey Bogart. Fans like a sequel of any kind to any story, if it is well thought out.

Mind Worms, pretty good. A weak plot, but very well written.

Jonah of the Jove-Run, ahem . . . cough cough . . . no comment.

Planet in Reverse, knots (STUNK). It was pretty good until people started walking backwards and erasing words with the point of a fountain pen. Holy jumpin' cyclotrons!

Space-Trap at Banya Tor, excellent. It's been a long time since I read anything in PLANET about space-pirates.

Confusion Cargo, a good story. But that Putnam is awfully free about using words I never heard of before.

Design for Doomsday . . . well, all I'll say is that it could have been better.

As for the illustrations, they were all fine.

McWilliams on pp. 6-7 was swell and not so much out of proportion as Martin's are. P. 13 was also good. I like the grin on Emil's face. P. 39 had nice shadowing. P. 43, ditto. P. 51 was poor, and p. 59 was worse yet. P. 69, hmmm . . . a gun like old "Wing Helmet" had there ought to be pretty good for hunting dinosaurs. P. 84, another hmmm . . . what's that guy in the background doing in his winter underwear? P. 94 was a Martin, was it not? (*Yes*—Ed.) Anyway, in it we have Martin's ever-present urge to undress his women in public. Now let me see . . . Oh, yes, there's a little one on p. 81 . . . Oh, man, what a picture! A female Indian with a sword and platform shoes.

I liked Mr. Fox's comment in the Vizigraph. Let's have more entries from different authors.

If Emmett McDowell doesn't send me the original manuscript of *Beyond the Yellow Fog* as a token of gratitude for all those nice things I said about him, I'll feel very much put out. (*It's in storage, smudged by printers and hen-tracked by me, and PS's legal property* . . . Sorry—Ed.)

Well, I'll see ya' again, Paul o' pal.

Sincerely,

MARVIN WILLIAMS

WIPS, SPIPS, PLOP

488 Littleton St.,
West Lafayette, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR,

The little man sat at the controls of the giant machine. As he manipulated them the lights of the tubes and dials grew brighter and brighter, a shrill whine arose from the depths of the machine and stopped. Suddenly a bell rang, then another, a whistle blew, and a pink light flashed on and off "TILT". There was a plopping noise and the usual little man handed me a parcel. "It's here," he said in a voice that was little more than a sigh, and vanished, leaving me alone with the Winter Issue of PLANET STORIES (WIPS to you), and the giant Parkhill-Robertson dual-purpose psychometric transubstantiator (what Whitehorn was working with when he vanished in a cloud of yellow smoke). Suddenly my little friend appeared at my elbow. He looked embarrassed. "You have a SPIPS coming too, pal," he said and gave it to me. (Spips, Spring Issue of PLANET STORIES . . . see?) (*No*—Ed.) So I looked at them. And read them. And these are my words. Repent, oh ye sinners, while there is yet time! Down with Fennel! Down with Payne! Down with the *Black Priestess of Varga!* Phooey on it! So much for WIPS.

The first story I read was the Vizi, La what a nasty thing to say to us readers, and here I was going to ask if you could go monthly. Tough (as they said in ages past) pineapples, Old Top. In regards to human migration to planets, Sigler, may I ask (1) Why anyone would want to leave dear old Tellus, and (2) How would 1,000,000 Hindus fit into a strictly urbane, highly civilized culture that would have to exist on any planet, say, with insufficient atmosphere, or no water, or both—and what do you do when there is no more farmland and timberland? As for race and brains, you have a good point; I might even agree with you, but doesn't environment have something to do with it? Maybe? Tell Lin ("I'll worm") Carter, that the name John has been popular a long time now, together with Sam and Joe and Mary and so forth. M. Axel-

rod, how did you get in? You and Bess? The letters of Bradley and Fox were good, but what can you expect of writers? As for Illos, give one to R. K. Anger, two to Dan Mulcahy and three to Jack Clements.

Now for the stories. NOW for the stories. NOW FOR THE STORIES!!! TA-ta-ta...

Jonah of the Jove-Run was the best. A classic. Wonderful! Excellent. Very Good. O.K. I liked it. *Outcasts of Solar III*. Nice writing, good plot, nice to see my old chum Gavin Murdock again, BUT... why does the hero have to be big, brainy, and brawny? One would be plenty, two superfluous, but three... My God! Still good, though. *Space Trap at Banya Tor*. Spuh-lendit; so Thorne is back too, huh? How nice; maybe he'll be back again some date in the distant future. (That *tang* is rough stuff, eh, Ed.?) (*Burp—Ed.*) *Design for Doomsday*. Hey! What is the World of Null A doing in PS? I thought van Vogt had that all sewed up, copyrighted, patented and everything else. If Venard was a Null-A, why didn't he have an extra brain like Gosseyn? And, if he was semantically trained, how come he was caught? (I just know you'll make some crack about Gosseyn being the only person having an extra brain, but by that time the whole Guard should have had them. G.I. of course.) *Mind Worms* was good, but nothing special. *Confusion Cargo* was merely confused and... guess what? *Planet in Reverse* stank. (Or knots—Ed.)

Yours as of Yore,

A. A. GILLILAND

SURELY AS SPACEFLIGHT...

Miami, Fla.

DEAR EDITOR,

Long time I have been gone!... but I'm back. Hurray for G. F. Fox! It is very common for a fan to carelessly state that an author "copies" or "borrows" his stuff. That is a damned serious accusation. It is time a writer hit back.

I am not quite sure what Sigler, E., is telling us about this time. Personally, I am on the side of the boys who think that the advantage of better "thinking climate" gave the Nordics the inside lane... and from there on out it has been a case of Heavy Foot and White Man's Burden. And to forestall the natural—from some people—comments, I am a mixture of Irish, Scotch, Welsh, and British, with a little Scandinavian and Cherokee mixed in. I have blonde hair and blue eyes. I am a Southerner, with the capital, and I don't believe equality of all races will come in this century... but it will surely get here.

By the way, are there any writing Negro fans? I am sure there must be. Probably many, but because of certain characters, they don't want to reveal their race.

All I have to say is... if there are any, more luck to them, and may they, and their race, rise above the somewhat shameful impositions they suffer under in most places. As I said... not in this century, but surely as spaceflight...

The stories, thusly...

(1) *Outcasts of Solar III*. The McDowell tradition, but why are scientists always either Atlases or shrimps? I'm getting a psychosis... I'm neither muscle-bound nor shriveled, and I want to be an engineer!

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(2) *Jonah of the Jove-Run*. No, hell, no, this gets first place! Damned good writing. When doesn't Bradbury write well?

(3) Schere's little psychology lesson, *Mind Worms*, applies well to the individual in today's society, as well as the race in a future society. Good writing, with the conditioned fear a little too strong to be overcome so completely in such a short time . . . and why didn't Hoag speak before?

(4) *Space-Trap at Banya Tor*. Not badly written space opera, but it suffers horribly by comparison with *The Derelict*, which was a fine story.

The other three rank about the same, with Walton maybe edging out Guth and Putnam.

I'm glad to see McWilliams in the illustrating chair. He has long been a favorite illustrator of mine. His anatomy is especially good, and I just like his style. But where is Moore? (*Well . . . er . . . he went somewhere.*—Ed.)

I'm afraid PS has gone downhill a little in this ish. Oh, well . . . look to the future.

If I have to rate the letters . . . here. First, Bradley. Second, Oliver. Third, van Couvering. Oke?

An idea . . . I recently got the phrase "reality is relative" tangled up in my thoughts, and can't get it out. Sure, reality is relative. I elucidate . . . to me, this object of furniture I am sitting on is real. It is solid, material, to my eyes and to my posterior. It resists gravity by holding me up.

But it is a material body . . . therefore it is really a collection of "static" energy charges, since, so say the physics boys, matter is but static energy. Therefore, it is really immaterial. Therefore, to a disinterested and slightly screw-loose observer named Halloran sitting across the room, it obviously cannot be solid and real, there under my posterior . . . and therefore I am blithely seated some twenty-two inches above the floor, supported by nothing but my own personal belief in the solidity of the object. When Halloran gets around to disproving the material existence of the floor, I expect to hear quite a commotion, since we are one floor up over the ladies' powder room.

When Halloran gets around to theorizing the beer out of an obviously immaterial bottle without removing the cap or breaking the glass, I shall write again. Or when another PS comes out.

Adieu, my unfortunate and sober friends. I have a date with an Irish lass whose hobby is time-travel. She says she does it by means of Inverted Logic, and I expect the evening to be quite educational. I know the *bestest* people!

Give us an issue with a good Anderson cover, McWilliams, Moore, and Leydenfrost inside, and stories by Bradbury, Kuttner, dePina and Hasse (what happened to them, anyway?) (*Stop asking questions!*—Ed.) McDowell, and Brackett, if you can get one from her (*Coming up.*—Ed.).

Fare thee well,

TOM PACE

OUR FAVORITE HEROIN

R.F.D. No. 1,
East Greenbush, New York

DEAR EDITOR,

Slogging through the reeking muck and groping horrors toward the forbidden dome of Fiction House—treasure vault of the best yarns in the

system—the Mad Martian remembered the frightened whispers, "An evil god rules there!" And I, the Mad Martian, was bent on stopping this Thing—in all its ghastly reality!

Of all the PLANET's bloodily brawling millions, only I sensed the Others. Even as I swung my fists and dodged the tearing dart-guns of those loyal readers who rose up to prevent this sacrilege, my skin crawled weirdly. What—*what* was so coldly looking down upon this hell-bent PLANET? On and on my faithful cohorts battled their bloody way behind me; up the long flights of steps and into the Place. My men tiptoed along the echoing corridors, gun hands trembling. What menace gripped this place?

On a high arched door, little coiled letters of fire spelled out the Word in archaic Neptunian, the horrific incantation, HPARGZIVI! The sturdy spacemen behind me cursed and fled. But the Mad Martian would not turn back now. The Things watched aghast as I went up into the ages-forbidden sanctum of the evil god.

I saw It, hanging motionless in the cold black void. Glowing softly there in the black nothingness—writhing evilly—what was the terrible power that could drive strong fans gibbering out the airlocks? And then I knew! For across the throne of the Thing was blazoned its name in letters of lambent flame; and I too shuddered and half shrieked as I read the words—PAUL L. PAYNE!

(Silly, isn't it? But *you* wrote most of it, Mr. Payne!)

And now that I, the Mad Martian Marion, have once again penetrated my loathsome way into the Sacred Precincts (I have, haven't I? Oh, say I have—) a few brief "ha!" comments on the Spring issue of PLANET may be in order. To begin with *I like that cover!* Honest, I do. It's beautiful! The only thing is, when a gal is on dry land, Anderson always dresses her in something resembling a bathing suit. Now that she is in the water and swimming, he clothes her fully—well, almost fully!

Who wants PLANET to come out bi-monthly? Quarterly is plenty for me. I know that's sacrilege, but I have few enough spare pennies to spend on magazines as it is. PLANET is one of my favorite mags, but four months is just about long enough. In between I read your competitors and by the time PS comes out again I am sick of them and ready to read some more good ole space-opera! So don't worry about me crying, sir. Besides, girls *never* cry. Only big, strong male fans do that!

The best of the stories this time was *Space Trap on Banya Tor*. I remember when *The Derelict* first appeared, and what a wonderful yarn that was—and *STOBT* is every bit as good, if not better! Only it should have been a novel, at least; things happened so fast that it was a little confusing!

Outcasts of Solar III was an old plot well rewritten. *Design for Doomsday*—Bryce Walton could not write a bad story if he tried till 2000 A. D., but he is trying hard enough! After his terrific *Mo-Shanson!*—this is near sacrilege! It is notable only for the Terran National Anthem—which I must confess brought a lump to the throat of this hardened Martian!

Planet in Reverse was impossible; I guess there has to be one poor story every issue and nine out of ten times Guth writes it *Mind Worms* was weakly conceived and poorly executed, yet the thought was good. *Jonah of the Jove Run*—



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this boy Bradbury writes the best stories, with the most loathsome plots, that I have ever read. I couldn't put this down. *Confusion Cargo* was, in my opinion, the finest of the shorts—Bradbury, of course, is far above comparison—for once someone has written a story with a woman as a hero, who is neither lush nor spoiled! Wonderful!

My Ghod, I'm over the limit, (*Not much*,—Ed.) and I haven't even mentioned *La Vizi!* First place to R. A. Bradley, for setting Shaw right about my weight. Larry could find out any time if he wanted to, though, he lives only ten miles from me! How dare he call himself a hermit! Second place to the egotistical I'll worm, Lin Carter. Third place to the Axle-road, inventor of Buxom Bess and to the curvilinear-vibrato etc., which is a machine to count Bess's curves. He and Oberfield should collaborate on their machinery! Give the booby prize, if any, to that living proof of the reversibility of Darwin's theory, Sigler. I have a sociology textbook, too, Eddie! Better still, give him Vestal!

Now! You PLP you, why didn't you print my letter? I raise my blaster, no answer so I shoot the editor. Too late I remember—I didn't write a letter! Well, anyway, now at last the Mad Martian, La Vizi's fav'rite heroin (habit forming dope) zimmers off, and the editor can take a dose of Payne-killer and sleep in a coma for another blissful four months.

STFectionately yours,

"The Mad Martian"

MARION ZIMMER

FLAP-JAWED HYENAS

1028 N. Broadway
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR,

This issue of *Planet* shows a little improvement, with better stories and a better cover than usual. The psychological short was good, although I can't conceive of an Earthman suffering from an inferiority complex.

The lead novel could have used a little soap and water, but outside of that it was fair. One item had me puzzled and that was the time ratio. If the Alpha Centaurians couldn't do any more than the Earth people did when they lived 10,000 years to our 70 it would be because they lived at such a vastly slower time rate that they couldn't even see us let alone doing anything about the matter. Yet in the story they were pictured as having the same time rate throughout. The story's solution of lengthening our lives to 10,000 years would only have aggravated the matter.

I am not so sure that such a long life span would be a good idea at any time. Imagine having to be plagued with the antics of Swoonatra and the booby-soxers for the next thousand years or so. Flesh and blood couldn't stand it.

I am sorry about the Martian ice cap deal but I was simply going by the astronomical textbooks that I have been able to find.

For those who wonder how I can ignore the insults of the other fans the answer is simple. I have had to work with so many flap-jawed

hyenas that I have become case-hardened to the harmless prattle of little children.

I cannot agree with those who think the planets will be rip-roaring affairs like new country is on earth. At least not for the first generation or two. There is the economic factor to be considered. It is going to cost a whale of a lot of money to plant an outpost on Venus, for instance. Undoubtedly the first landing will be concerned with finding fuel for the return and also the possibilities of the land. Then, it may be that a big corporation would get a grant of land on Venus. This would necessitate the expenditure of large sums of money before any return is available.

The company is going to import workers, but they will be the highest grade workers obtainable regardless of whether they are scientists or laymen. Every attempt will be made to get the colony on a firm basis; in all probability it will be rigidly ruled by a company administrator.

It is going to cost a lot of money to ship goods across space, so very little liquor or tobacco will be shipped as more important supplies will go first. It won't be until the men's wives have been able to join them and their children have grown up that there will be enough people to make a rip-roaring drinking joint. You can't make a booze camp if there are no more than a couple hundred high grade scientists and engineers around, especially if they have been selected because they don't drink.

For those who still believe that all races are alike I think they ought to ponder this old Arab proverb, "Allah gave cunning to three things: the tongue of the Arab, the hand of the Chinese, and the brain of the Frank."

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

A COLUMBIAN SPEAKS

3401 6th Avenue
Columbus, Georgia

DEAR EDITOR,

Good for you! Good for Sigler! Sigler said it and you allowed it in the face of stupid traitorous opposition. Hooray for racial superiority theories. At last we had someone in the pages of the *Vizigraph* come out and say it. Certainly some races are superior to others. . . . And don't let propaganda tell you any different.

Furthermore, aside from the better race idea, which I uphold, the differences in races is cause enough for mistrust and possibly eternal strife until only one dominant race remained.

Regardless of these smart boys who think that the "shoot-the-dirty-Martians" plot is wrong, it isn't. It's old and overworked in science fiction but still reasonable and the only sensible way to deal with an alien race. I laugh at the terrifically funny brotherly love societies.

Shot the b . . . bums first and ask questions later. . . . Science fiction is great, the best and only worthwhile fiction to my notion, but many of its fans are extremely impractical and starchy eyed. . . . Two or more alien races can never live together in harmony. For short periods perhaps, but in the long run . . . ERUPTION! And good for it.

PAUL D. COX